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**ANTHOLOGIZING WOMEN:  
MEDIEVAL GENRE, GENDER AND GENITAL POETICS**

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**by**

**Jennifer Leigh Sapio**

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**For my mother**

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**Anthologizing Women:  
Medieval Genre, Gender and Genital Poetics**

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This study investigates three medieval manuscript collections – compiled in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries in Herefordshire, Derbyshire and East Anglia, respectively – that are significant in their similarly implied female readerships, their thematic treatment of the “problem of women,” and their vocalization of the perspectives, and indeed often complaints, of female characters. At the intersection of feminist and bibliographic and textual methodologies, this project traces the interpretive effects of reading gendered, and specifically genital, discourse in the context of the medieval household books and literary anthologies that contain them, investigating representations of the body in various generic texts – from the speaking “Daun Cun” of the Anglo-Norman fabliau to the metaphorical “purs” of the Chaucerian complaint ballad, and lastly, to the saint’s “castle” in East Anglian religious drama. We will find, for example, that the variant of the raunchy fabliau “Le Chevalier qui fist les Cons Parler” in MS Harley 2253 resonates with the editorial concerns of the manuscript, namely a dialogic critique of misogyny and a commitment to unveiling societal injustice and gendered violence. In the case of the Findern manuscript, we posit a gendered reading of Chaucer’s “Complaint to His Purse”

in the context of the “feminist sequence” of canonical texts as well as the original female-voiced lyric poems contained in the collection, one that draws parallels between the “feminization” of the pregnant female, the (masculine) poet, and the courtly subject. Finally, I investigate the representation of the saint’s body in the *Digby Play of Mary Magdalene* as a gendered edifice, in all its vulnerability as well as spiritual power. Ultimately, I argue that this poetics of the body is employed in a range of genres as disparate as fabliau, complaint and religious drama in order to expose the inherent violence against women that props up the patriarchal ideology of chastity, marriage and courtly culture. According to this poetics, political poems written by male artists for the king become allegories for love, sexual rather than political union, and pregnancy; and religious dramas about devout women ring with unruly resonances of prostitution and rape.



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## Introduction

### Medieval Representations of Women, their Bodies, and their Voices

The “problem of women”— of women speaking; of women having, using and/or enjoying their bodies; of the complicated representation of the above in patriarchal, misogynist societies – is one with continued historical relevance.<sup>1</sup> Alternately represented as sacrificial offerings in medieval saints’ lives, objects of fleeting beauty in lyric poems, and contested sites in legal case records, women and their body parts boast a long literary and cultural history.<sup>2</sup> Literary representation of women, of the female body and its constituent parts, varies from literal, explicit, obscene and pornographic to metaphorically distant, euphemistic and decorous. Specifically, the vagina has a long and varied *vita* in medieval and Renaissance texts.<sup>3</sup> Its diseases are detailed in gynecological

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<sup>1</sup> For a description of the “problem of women” as an organizing principle for a 14<sup>th</sup>-century manuscript, see Carter Revard, “Oppositional Thematics and Metanarrative in MS Harley 2253, Quires 1-6” in *Essays in Manuscript Geography: Vernacular Manuscripts of the English West Midlands from the Conquest to the Sixteenth Century*, ed. Wendy Scase (Turnhout, Brepols Publishers, 2007). For a discussion of the Renaissance “controversy about women,” see Katherine Usher Henderson and Barbara F. McManus, eds., *Half Humankind: Contexts and Texts of the Controversy about Women in England, 1540-1640* (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1985). For a contemporary instantiation of this problem, see Michelle Goldberg, “What is a Woman? The Dispute Between Radical Feminism and Transgenderism,” *New Yorker* (August 4, 2014). Finally, Marxist theory outlines its own perspective on the “problem of women,” namely that “as long as the proletarian woman remains economically dependent upon the capitalist boss and her husband, the breadwinner, and in the absence of comprehensive measures to protect motherhood and childhood and provide socialised child-care and education, this cannot equalise the position of women in marriage or solve the problem of relationships between the sexes.” (*Theses, Resolutions and Manifestos of the First Four Congresses of the Third International*, 215.)

<sup>2</sup> For examples of scholarship on these topics, see Sarah Beckwith, “Ritual, Church and Theatre: Medieval Dramas of the Sacramental Body” in *Culture and History 1350-1600*, ed. David Aers (Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 1992), 65-89; Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1987); and Christopher Cannon, “Chaucer and Rape: Uncertainty’s Certainties,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 22 (2000): 67-92.

manuals.<sup>4</sup> Bodily chastity is prescribed in Latin church documents and spiritual vernacular texts. And secular texts relished in the obscene and euphemistic connotations of genital references. Although representations of the female genitalia are often submerged in canonical texts, and in mainstream scholarship, for that matter, the figure of the vagina penetrates [paradox intended] even the most anthologized Early Modern texts. For example, in the *Pearl* manuscript, Gawain comes to the place where he must receive a fatal blow, a spot rich with genital and infernal images:

Hit hade a hole on þe ende and on ayþer syde,  
 And ouergrowen with gresse in glodes anywhere,  
 And al watz holȝ inwith, nobot an olde caue  
 Or a creuisse of an olde cragge – he couþe hit noȝt deme  
 With spelle.  
 ‘We! Lorde,’ quoþ þe gentyle knyȝt,  
 ‘Wheþer þis be þe Grene Chapelle?  
 Here myȝt aboute mydnyȝt  
 þe Dele his matynnes telle!’ (2180-2188)<sup>5</sup>

Here the poet describes a hellish “hole,” “or a creuisse of an olde cragge” which bewilders and terrifies the brave and “gentyle” knight. In the same manuscript, of course, the poet describes the metaphorical “pruyy perle withouten spot” (12). This metaphorical pearl also clearly denotes the literal purity of the body. Perhaps then, the *Pearl* poet’s reference to the pearl is a euphemistic genital image. This contrasting imagery of the

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<sup>3</sup> For examples of specific body parts as the focus of criticism of early modern texts, see David Hillman and Carla Mazzio, *The Body in Parts: Fantasies of Corporeality in Early Modern Europe* (New York, Rutledge, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> See Monica Helen Green, trans., *The Trotula: A Medieval Compendium of Women’s Medicine* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> Stanbury, Sarah, ed., *Pearl* (Kalamazoo, 2001).

female body as alternately characterized by hell-fire or priceless gems draws on the anti-feminist tradition of extolling virginity and demonizing female sexuality in Early Modern literary and cultural history.<sup>6</sup>

Chaucer's Wife of Bath powerfully engages with dominant ideologies of sex, marriage and gender, suggesting that her "chamber of Venus" is the defining feature of her identity and the director of her "inclinacioun." Yet, she also claims the masculine emblematic authority of the "martes mark" in her "privee place" as a contrasting euphemism for her genitalia. The Wife of Bath's remarks establish representations of the vagina as central to understanding sexual difference and the construction of gender in the Early Modern imagination.<sup>7</sup> In the prologue to her tale, the Wife of Bath uses at least a half dozen euphemisms for her sexual parts: she mentions her "flour" which she puts to use in "the actes and in fruyt of marriage" (113-114); she talks of the "membres" that urinate and procreate (116); she refers to the "thynges smale" that differentiate males from females (121); she claims that by using his "sely instrument" a man can pay his marriage debt (132); she employs the common genital reference to a "harneys" (136); she boasts of having "queynte right ynogh at eve" (332) for her old husband whether or not she has another lover; she promises to keep her "bele chose" for her husband's "tooth"

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Jerome's *Against Jovinian* in *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: An Anthology of Medieval Texts*, ed. Alcuin Blamires (Oxford, 1992), 63-73. See also Mary Dove, "Evading Textual Intimacy: The French Secular Verse" in *Studies in the Harley Manuscript*, ed. Susanna Fein (Kalamazoo, 2000), 329-350.

<sup>7</sup> Here I'm intentionally eliding a Medieval/Renaissance divide in favor of a periodization that "registers continuity" in the alternative history of non-procreative sexualities across time periods, as well as "between composition and consumption" of any particular text. See Jennifer Summit and David Wallace's "Rethinking Periodization" in the "Medieval/Renaissance: After Periodization" special issue of the *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 37.3 (Fall 2007): 448.

(447); she brags about having “the beste quoniam myghte be” (608); and she alludes to her “privee place” and her “chamber of Venus” (620). These allusions to women’s “privee” parts range from euphemistic to sexual, anatomical to obscene. She speaks in three languages about the unspeakable, hidden parts of, in particular, the female body. Tison Pugh argues that this bawdy, bodily language is part of fabliau discourse, which in the case of the Wife of Bath, asserts and prioritizes her female sexuality over patriarchal, heteronormative formulations of sex and gender. Thus, Chaucer’s employment of these genital images contributes to his engagement with and critique of political, social, religious, and domestic structures of power.

This thematic focus on her “joly body” characterizes the Wife of Bath’s *Prologue* and foregrounds the treatment in the *Tale* of topics such as sexuality, desire, power and rape. In *Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics* (1989), Carolyn Dinshaw argues that the Wife of Bath’s bawdy narrative of the body draws attention to the gendered position of a feminine text being acted upon by a masculine tradition of interpretation, with real and dangerous consequences to the female subject.<sup>8</sup> Dinshaw’s argument begins with Chaucer’s “Adam Scriveyne” about a “rape” – not genital, she argues, but gendered masculine and feminine – which establishes the “figurative identification between the human body and the manuscript page” (4). In response to patriarchal “auctoritee” and masculine glossators, the “Wife maintains that the literal text – her body – can speak for itself” (115). She talks back to masculine discourse, and in this way, “Chaucer imagines the possibility of a

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<sup>8</sup> Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics* (Madison, 1989).

masculine reading that is not antifeminist, that does acknowledge, in good faith, feminine desire, and further, he represents the struggle and violence to the feminine that accompany the articulation of this fantasy” (117). For the Wife of Bath, speaking about her body, with her body, in defense of her body, depends on her employing a poetics of the body – I might argue, a specifically genital poetics -- to emphasize the potential pleasures and vulnerabilities inherent in the embodied experience of literary and actual women.

However, while Lee Patterson concedes in “For the Wyves Love of Bathe” that “her act of speaking is itself significant,” he questions whether the “feminist subtext” of the Wife of Bath’s speech is at all effective.<sup>9</sup> Despite displaying that she has mastered “masculine modes of argument” in the Prologue, Patterson argues, the Wife of Bath is “confined within the prison house of masculine language” – her speech dependent on patriarchal discourse, a masculine literary tradition, and a male poet’s imagination (682). He provocatively asks: “What kind of independence can we attribute to a female protagonist who is so evidently a creature of the male imagination?” (687). In the end, however, Patterson qualifies his argument, claiming that “the poet simultaneously upholds and undermines the orthodoxies of literary and sexual authority” (691). The Wife of Bath, after all, engages with men in the terms of masculine scholarship and anti-feminist stereotypes as she speaks in defense of her position in society.

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<sup>9</sup> Lee Patterson, “For the Wyves Love of Bathe”: Feminine Rhetoric and Poetic Resolution in the Roman De La Rose and the Canterbury Tales,” *Speculum* 58.3 (1983): 656-95.

In *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender* (1992), Elaine Tuttle Hansen, too, problematizes the idea of a “triumphant” and “powerful” feminine voice in the *Prologue* and *Tale*, arguing that “as long as she accepts (or, what amounts to the same thing, attempts to invert) the basic power differential and the obfuscation of power reflected and supported by the language she uses, her struggles are in vain.”<sup>10</sup> Indeed, both the “norm and the transgression,” in Hansen’s analysis, are “able to see themselves and speak for themselves only in terms provided by the dominant language and mythology of their culture.”<sup>11</sup> Finally, the scene of violence and silencing -- which Hansen terms the Wife’s “mutilation” -- she argues, “serves as a climactic symbol of the simultaneously muting and deafening effect of the dominant discourse and the gender hierarchy it enforces.”<sup>12</sup> According to Hansen’s reading of the Wife of Bath, her powerful voice is coopted by the controlling and regulating discourses of patriarchal power, and ultimately results in violence to her body.

The scene of domestic violence in which the Wife of Bath is assaulted is the typical fare of the discourse of obscene comedy that Nicole Nolan Sidhu investigates.<sup>13</sup> A similar example of obscene comedy occurs in the cycle plays’ representation of Uxor Noe, or Noah’s wife, as a “shrewish spouse” in the tradition of literature about henpecked

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<sup>10</sup> Elaine Tuttle Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender* (Berkeley, 1992), 31.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>13</sup> Nicole Nolan Sidhu, *Indecent Exposure: Gender, Politics, and Obscene Comedy in Middle English Literature* (Philadelphia, 2016).



husbands.<sup>14</sup> When Noah tells his wife that it is time to board the ark, she flatly refuses but is ultimately forced to comply by means of a threat of physical violence, to which Noah's wife replies by assaulting her husband. This scene has some structural parallels to the scene in the Wife of Bath's *Prologue* in which Alison and Jankyn exchange blows. While certainly violent, these scenes recall the comedic discourse of the unruly woman and the henpecked husband. Just as the women armed with distaffs in the Digby *Killing of the Children* do, the Wife of Bath strikes her husband "on the cheke." In this and other cases, obscene discourse can reveal and even offer a limited critique of the violence inflicted against bodies in the hierarchal system of gender.

Not only does the Wife resist her husband's endorsement of misogynist, patriarchal authorities, she also asserts her sexuality and demonstrates a keen understanding of her body's relationship to power and to discourses of authority by touting her knowledges of "thynges smale." "Ludicrous" as they may be for Sidhu, these elements of "obscene comedy not only [provide] a rich dialectical atmosphere that facilitates scrutiny of social power relations, [but also] issue critiques of established powers that would have been too dangerous to air in other, less abject, discourses".<sup>15</sup> Perhaps, then, the Wife does indeed express some gendered agency through her employment of obscene discourses from the fabliau genre. She bases her authority on the

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<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of the visual representation of Uxor Noe in the Hereford cathedral map, see Dan Birkholz, "Mapping Medieval Utopia: Exercises in Restraint," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 36.3 (2006): 585-618.

<sup>15</sup> Sidhu, *Indecent Exposure*, 14.

“experience” of her “joly body,” which she acclaims from the first line of her *Prologue* until the final lines of the curse that concludes the Wife of Bath’s *Tale*.

In this way, her speech – like other examples of “bodytalk” – “can resist the constructions that contain and define them,” according to E. Jane Burns.<sup>16</sup> In a feminist argument, Burns makes “space” for listening to “voices that speak against and dissent from the dominant tradition.”<sup>17</sup> She asks, “What happens when the very texts that purport to know women as brainless bodies also reveal how those bodies know, know enough to speak, and to explain, in different ways, what they know?”<sup>18</sup> Might they, in fact, “rewrite the tales in which they appear”?<sup>19</sup> Referring to Old French fabliaux specifically, Burns argues that listening to women’s speech in the discourse of fabliau illuminates an anti-moral:

despite the typically conservative endings... which reinstate male wisdom and authority over the wanton chaos of female pleasure, these texts demonstrate vividly how woman can shake up the standard scenario of male/female relations by the very exercise of those orifices used traditionally to typecast and dismiss her.<sup>20</sup>

Whereas the “vagina is ‘known,’ by the male observers who have mythologized it as a mindless and silent hole begging to be filled,” the Wife of Bath’s knowledge of her

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<sup>16</sup> E. Jane Burns, *Bodytalk: When Women Speak in Old French Literature* (Philadelphia, 1993).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>20</sup> Burns, *Bodytalk*, 63. This perceived anti-moral functions in contrast to the stated moral often included at the end of fabliaux.

*queynte* is hyperbolically exaggerated in all its multivalence.<sup>21</sup> It is a useful tool, a desired object, a commercial asset, a sweet superlative thing, a *privatee*, ironically, that she discusses in public *ad nauseum*. Rather than revealing the single gaze of the penis-eye, the Wife of Bath's *Prologue* and *Tale* display the multiplicity of discourses of female sexuality and euphemisms for the female genitalia. The tale that her "joly body" tells is one that implicates all women's bodies, their genitals, their voices, their agency and the regulation thereof in a poetics of the body and a discourse of dissent.

Indeed, this is not the first study to consider the relationship between women's bodies and structures of power and language. But what do I mean precisely by "poetics of the body"? To begin, poetics is not an entirely intuitive concept. By poetics I mean a new critical, formalist attention to the aesthetics, discourses, and language of literary texts.<sup>22</sup> The term "body" too is heavy with baggage. First, the biological, physiological differences between male and female bodies are not without value judgments in our society. In the introduction to *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir writes, "woman has ovaries, a uterus; these peculiarities imprison her in her subjectivity, circumscribe her within the limits of her own nature.... [Man] regards the body of woman as a hindrance, a prison, weighed down by everything peculiar to it."<sup>23</sup> Women's bodies define women as

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<sup>21</sup> See Bernard S. Levy, "The Wife of Bath's Queynte Fantasye," *The Chaucer Review* 4.2 (1969): 106-122.

<sup>22</sup> See Paul Zumthor, *Toward a Medieval Poetics* (Minneapolis, 1992).

<sup>23</sup> Simone De Beauvoir, "Introduction to the Second Sex," in *New French Feminisms: An Anthology* (New York, 1981).

a lack, a negative, the Other to the masculine principle; consequently, women's bodies are subordinated to control and regulation.

However, the terms "women" and "bodies" are deconstructed in Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990). She engages with Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, founding her argument on his theories of the socially constructed nature of norms of heterosexuality as well as categories of "sex." Butler argues that embodied gender identities are formed by repeated "words, acts and gestures," which "create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core, an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality."<sup>24</sup> The construction of a performative gender is not causally related or expressive of an a priori "body," for "the boundary of the body as well as the distinction between internal and external is established through the ejection and transvaluation of something originally part of identity into a defiling otherness."<sup>25</sup> The body, therefore, according to Butler, is "not a 'being,' but a variable boundary, a surface whose permeability is politically regulated, a signifying practice within a cultural field of gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality."<sup>26</sup> Within Butler's theoretical framework which deconstructs categories of women, gender, sexuality, sex, and bodies, the cultural strategies naturalizing these categories are revealed and critiqued. Foucault's juridical law that organizes patriarchal society has at stake the categorization, definition, and

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<sup>24</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 136.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 139.

suppression of women's bodies as distinct objects, imbued with characteristics of the "other," and often sexualized, subordinated, and controlled. However, despite its centrality to "the reproduction of often repressive social relations," as Claire Sponsler writes, the body "can also function as a source of subversion."<sup>27</sup> Thus, when I refer to a poetics of the body, I refer to the contested representation of the female body, including its subordination and resistance. Power dynamics such as these are certainly at work in the texts and manuscripts I investigate in this dissertation.

Additionally, Bakhtin's theory of the carnival inflects what I identify as the poetics of the body as well. As Claire Sponsler summarizes in *Drama and Resistance*:

Whether seen as cultural safety valve, as an exercise of power and surveillance, or as an opportunity for genuine revolt, the basic principle of carnival is understood to be a downward transformation in which everything socially and spiritually exalted is represented on the bodily, material level. This process of transformation includes irreverent speech, such as cursing and blasphemy; symbolic and actual violence, such as thrashings and beatings; and inversionary images, both cosmological (the underworld, hell, devils) and anatomical (the buttocks, genitalia, excrement). ... In the carnival, as Bakhtin has argued, the 'grotesque' body – unruly, excremental, rude, and unregulated – is allowed unrepentant freedom of expression while the regulated, enclosed, orderly, and pure body is banished from sight. Carnavalesque play is thus seen as unleashing the body, freeing it from its civilizing constraints and licensing it to misbehave in a variety of crudely rebellious ways.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Claire Sponsler, *Drama and Resistance: Bodies, Goods, and Theatricality in Late Medieval England* (Minneapolis, 1997), xv.

<sup>28</sup> Sponsler, *Drama and Resistance*, 79. See also Michail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington, 2009), in which he details the "downward movement... inherent in all forms of popular-festive merriment and grotesque realism," one that is "directed toward the underworld, both earthly and bodily" (370).

References to the embodied nature of “experience,” as we see in the Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale, as well as the specific references to her “grotesque body” challenge a certain decorousness, implicating obscenity and resistance in her speech. In a carnivalesque upheaval, the Wife of Bath and the other women’s bodies and voices that I investigate in this project overturn, at least momentarily, the status quo. They rebel against reverent speech; they point to the violence against bodies inherent in patriarchal society; and they invert language’s potentials to its crudest, most bawdy forms. The poetics of the body that concerns me in this study is specifically a genital poetics, focused on representations of the vagina. It is by turns playful, obscene, euphemistic, and sacred, and similar to Stanbury and Lomperis’s discussion of “body politics,” the poetics of the body that I identify reveals how the “gender-body relations in medieval writings both stage and challenge the defining force of dominant ideologies.”<sup>29</sup>

The performance of the Wife of Bath is a focal point through which the contours of my investigation in this project become clear. The Wife of Bath engages with a variety of recurrent thematics that we will trace in this study: the problem of women; representation and ventriloquization of women’s voices; a focus on women’s bodies and their genitals; women readers and audiences; women’s roles at home and abroad, and other related topics. First, Chaucer, ventriloquizes a feminine voice in the mouth of a character who both challenges and epitomizes anti-feminist stereotypes. Similarly, the

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<sup>29</sup> See Linda Lomperis and Sarah Stanbury, *Feminist Approaches to the Body in Medieval Literature*, (Philadelphia, 1994), x. For another gendered and embodied poetics, see Schibanoff, *Chaucer’s Queer Poetics*, in which she articulates a contrasting poetics to the patriarchal language of “flowering traditions” and the “genesis of poems” (22) – the dominant aesthetic of heterosexual art. Instead, queer poetics resists the “models and metaphors of art” upon which the claim that Chaucer is the “father” of English poetry is based.

texts I investigate represent feminine speakers' perspectives – a type of bodytalk. The Wife of Bath, after all, famously claims that her bodily “experience... is right ynogh for me/ To speke” (1-3).<sup>30</sup> She emphasizes the dialogic nature of her speech, its response to resounding criticism. She repeats the accusations against her -- and against her body, her sexuality, and her marital status -- by retorting the “thou seist” of patriarchal society with “but herkneth how I sayde” (234, 293). We trace these themes in a range of other voices, texts, genres, and manuscripts in this study.

Next, we find in the Wife of Bath's narrative a simultaneous co-existence of obscene discourses of the body and courtly language, romance conventions and fabliau politics. As Sidhu demonstrates, obscene comedy transcends generic boundaries, appearing in fabliau and religious drama alike – so the discourse of gender and genitals crosses generic boundaries. One of this project's main objectives is to trace the genital poetics I've identified in places both expected and surprising. Taking the Wife of Bath's engagement with gendered and genital language to perform and dissent from patriarchal structures of authority as a model case, this dissertation investigates this genital poetics of the body in genres as varied as 14<sup>th</sup>-century Anglo-Norman fabliau, Chaucerian complaint, and 15<sup>th</sup>-century religious drama. Figures of women's bodies as garrulous mouths, empty holes, or strong edifices punctuate the gendered discourses in a variety of genres, and influence the organizational logic of the manuscripts which contain them. The Wife of Bath's bawdy language, her focus on the body, her critique of misogynist

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<sup>30</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer., *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry Dean Benson, 3rd edn. (Boston, 1987).

representations of women, and her exposures of structures of power that silence and violate women characterize the other instances of metaphorical connotations of the female body in the texts I investigate in each chapter.

I focus on a wide breadth of generic texts in order to display the patterns in connotations and the uses to which poetics of the body are employed. What is the effect in a fabliau of re-naming a knight and his squire after the talking cun and cul who betray women's secrets? How does Chaucer capitalize on the gendered connotations of his "purs" in his political complaint poem? And why does the Digby Mary Magdalene play stage her fall as an invasion of her metaphorical castle – or is it a rape of her physical body? The Wife of Bath, we think, would have told a good fabliau, she tells a romance, she certainly complains, she practices scholastic argumentations, and she claims to attend "pleyes of myracles," among other entertainments. Our attention, too, in this project, will be to the occurrence in three genres – fabliau, lyric, and drama -- of metaphorical and literal poetic employments of obscene language about the body, specifically the female body. And the Wife of Bath, and those women in her sect know a lot about the female body. When Alison exhorts "ye wyves" to attend to her words, she imagines and creates a sympathetic audience of women. From an "*abc a femmes*" to the feminine voice of complaint to the sacred words of a female saint, the primary manuscripts in this study similarly imply a women's audience, and indeed may have had actual audiences consisting of mixed gender if not exclusively female audiences.

Attention to bibliographic and textual details of the particular manuscripts investigated in this study suggests that the genital poetics which I trace across generic



boundaries also serves to organize collections of texts in medieval miscellanies, anthologies and/or compilations. The Wife of Bath's Prologue, in fact, exemplifies this relationship between the body and the book. Jankyn's book of Wikked Wyves is a collection of anti-feminist and anti-marriage texts used to quite literally assault the Wife's body.<sup>31</sup> And Jankyn's book is, after all, a compilation, as are MSS Harley 2253, CUL Ff. 1.6 and Digby 133, the objects of this study. As Ralph Hanna argues, the Wife of Bath is her own compiler, as is Chaucer, of anti-feminist texts, to which the Wife responds with more and less stereotypical counter-arguments.<sup>32</sup> The assemblage of Wikked Wyves that her husband reads is – despite or at times as a result of its anti-feminism – a model of the other texts I investigate in the following chapters.<sup>33</sup>

As the theme of wives' wickedness organizes Jankyn's book, so do other medieval manuscripts have in the "lexicon of intentionality" some kind of selection and/or organizational trends, which I identify as an organizational logic to the texts included in a particular manuscript.<sup>34</sup> Hanna identifies the poles of intentionality as characterizing "random" miscellanies or "planned" anthologies.<sup>35</sup> His definition of a

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<sup>31</sup> For a discussion of the erotic violence in the scene with Jankyn's book, see Marilyn Desmond, *Ovid's Art and the Wife of Bath: The Ethics of Erotic Violence* (Ithaca, 2006).

<sup>32</sup> Ralph Hanna, "Compilatio and the Wife of Bath: Latin Backgrounds, Ricardian Texts" in *Pursuing History: Middle English Manuscripts and Their Texts* (Stanford, 1989), 1-11.

<sup>33</sup> For more on "assemblage", see Arthur Bahr, *Fragments and Assemblages* (Chicago, 2013).

<sup>34</sup> Bahr, *Fragments and Assemblages*, 2.

<sup>35</sup> Ralph Hanna, "Miscellaneity and Vernacularity: Conditions of Literary Production in Late Medieval England," in *The Whole Book: Cultural Perspectives on the Medieval Miscellany*, eds. Stephen G. Nichols and Siegfried Wenzel (Ann Arbor, 1996), 37-51. See also Theo Stemmler, "Miscellany or

vernacular compilation recognizes a compiler's "desire" for or composition of a "rough unity" in the design of the manuscript's contents.<sup>36</sup> This "assemblage," in Bahr's terms, of textual meanings contributes to social constructions of meaning as well. Take for example Chaucer's compilation *The Canterbury Tales*. In the Prologue the poem is framed as a collection of source materials. The "compaignye" assembles, and then the speaker promises to rehearse every tale "after a man... everich word, if it be in his charge... Or ellis he moot telle his tale untrewe" (731-735). The assemblage of characters, the collection of tales representative of a range of genres, as well as the order of the tales renegotiates the social hierarchies at work in the context of the medieval society and culture from which the manuscript was produced.

Bahr employs the term "constellation" to identify this matrix of aesthetic, textual and social factors that interrelate in the politics and poetics of medieval manuscript compilations. By meaningfully arranging, selecting, and/or juxtaposing individual works, the compiler generates "a text/work that is more than the sum of its parts."<sup>37</sup> In the Wife of Bath's tale, we have a sort of infinite regression of compilations. Chaucer includes the Wife's voice among a number of other pilgrims' voices in the collection of Tales; in the Wife's prologue, she compiles source materials in her refutation of anti-feminist ideology; and her narrative features a specific collected work – Jankyn's Book

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Anthology? The Structure of Medieval Manuscripts: MS Harley 2253, for Example," in *Studies in the Harley Manuscript: the Scribes, Contents, and Social Contexts of British Library MS Harley 2253*, ed. Susanna Fein (Kalamazoo, 2000), 111-122.

<sup>36</sup> Hanna, "Miscellaneity and vernacularity," 44-46.

<sup>37</sup> Bahr, *Fragments and Assemblages*, 3.

of Wikked Wyves. Attending to each compilation individually yields fruitful connections to other texts and cultural meanings in the “manuscript matrix.”<sup>38</sup> How might the collection of a number of anti-feminist texts in Jankyn’s Book of Wikked Wyves multiply and reinforce the meaning of any one of its texts individually? How does the juxtaposition of the Wife’s bawdy language in the Prologue with the courtly language of romantic conventions in the tale itself function? How is the Wife of Bath’s voice inflected in the context of Chaucer’s compilation of disparate characters’ voices and narratives? And what to do with the bibliographic and textual evidence of multiple and inconsistent versions of tales and fragments in the *Canterbury Tales* collection as a whole? These layers of questions can begin to be answered by suggesting meaning matrices within which compilations can be interpreted, including thematic connections between texts, organizational principles at work in manuscripts as a whole, and relationships to other texts and cultural productions that form the fabric of the text’s physical and aesthetic universe.

In other words, we can employ a lateral philology -- as Ingrid Nelson performs in her study of “Harrowing of Hell” -- one that attends to a manuscript’s contemporary connections to other texts and cultural performances rather than exclusively to its genealogies and source texts. Nelson’s methodology focuses “on restoring relationships between a text and its social context, and between the individuals who live within that

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<sup>38</sup> See Symes, “Manuscript Matrix, Modern Canon,” in *Oxford Twenty-First Century Approaches to Literature: Middle English*, ed. Paul Strohm (New York, 2007), in which she uses the term “manuscript matrix” to refer to the inter-textual connections between texts within the same manuscript, as well as the important roles of authors, compiler, scribes and readers in the collaborative making of meaning out of medieval manuscripts in their cultural contexts.

context.”<sup>39</sup> She investigates the Middle English “Harrowing of Hell” verse dialogue in its three manuscript occurrences and in the context of the “Harrowing of Hell” cycle plays. She explores in particular the copy in Digby 86, a book whose other texts and social contexts, she argues, are integral to a fulsome understanding of “Harrowing of Hell,” only one of many texts in the Harley manuscript’s matrix of meaning. Thus, in this dissertation, I attend to the material manuscripts, noting significant bibliographic and textual details that contribute to the characterization of each of the books – each case study -- in my investigation of gendered poetics in medieval vernacular collections. I contextualize individual texts within each manuscript in relationship to other works in the same collection. Where other copies exist of the texts in question, I follow those lateral philological paths to other contemporary manuscripts. I investigate the cultural milieu from which each manuscript is gathered. In these ways, I aim to develop a broad conceptualization of the way gendered and genital poetics function in the context of other women’s books, complaints about women, complaints by women, domestic dramas, and anti-feminist sources, as I follow the trajectory from the objects of my study to other connections in the constellation.

In addition to its debt to new critical, lateral philological, bibliographic and textual methodologies, my project is also deeply informed by the tradition of feminist scholarship attentive to women in literary history, “the problem of women” explored thematically in texts; real women as readers, writers and patrons of texts; representations

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<sup>39</sup> Ingrid Nelson, “Performance of Power in Medieval English Households: The Case of the Harrowing of Hell,” *JEGP* 112.1 (January 2013), 48-69 at 69.

of women -- their voices, desires and bodies; and critiques of gendered power dynamics and systems of patriarchal authority.<sup>40</sup> As Susan Stanbury and Linda Lomperis suggest, “the part played by the feminist critic [is to retrieve] that which a particular culture represses or marginalizes.”<sup>41</sup> In a way, then, I seek to uncover the feminine in these manuscripts, to find the female voices and women readers and genital images where they appear explicitly as well as where they wait implicitly to be revealed. My attention to the texts and manuscripts I investigate in this study is thus directed by the field’s interest in exploring women’s embodied experiences, marginalized and repressed as they are, in medieval literature. And it is not anachronistic to see in medieval texts and manuscripts rhetoric about women and a poetics of the body, nay, even a genital poetics. In such a canonical text as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, after all, the Pearl poet represents the metaphorical “pearl” as well as the literal naked body of the lady of the house. The lady declares her desire to Gawain:

Ye are welcum to my cors,  
Yowre awen won to wale,  
Me behouez of fyne force  
Your seruaunt be, and schale.

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<sup>40</sup> See Judith M. Bennett, *History Matters: Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism* (Philadelphia, 2006); Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley, 2010), in which she discusses the role of women’s bodies in medieval religiosity, especially as it relates to food; Joan Ferrante explores the roles of women in the production of medieval manuscripts in *To the Glory of Her Sex: Women’s Roles in the Composition of Medieval Texts* (Bloomington, 1997). See also June Hall McCash, “The Role of Women in the Rise of the Vernacular,” *Comparative Literature* 60.1 (2008): 45-57; Sheila Delaney, *Impolitic Bodies: Poetry, Saints, and Society in Fifteenth-Century England: the Work of Osbern Bokenham* (New York, 1998); and Karma Lochrie’s “Women’s ‘Pryvetees’ and Fabliau Politics in The Miller’s Tale” *Exemplaria* 6.2 (1994): 287-304;

<sup>41</sup> Lomperis and Stanbury, eds., *Feminist Approaches to the Body in Medieval Literature*, xi.

Declaring that Gawain is “welcum” to her “cors,” the poet primes the reader for the intimate, sexual, even genital image of the girdle that is so integral to the plot and the poetics of this quintessential medieval poem.

Similarly, the particular texts I’ve chosen to investigate for my dissertation project thematize the problem of women’s sexuality, as well as explicitly represent the vagina as a contested site. First, MS Harley 2253 is a 14<sup>th</sup>-century tri-lingual anthology that boasts the majority of extant Anglo-Norman fabliaux and a significant number of pre-Chaucerian Middle English lyrics, including a number of “performance poems” in which single women, widows, unruly wives and powerful patrons articulate their experiences of shame and pleasure *around* the “cun” and the “cul”.<sup>42</sup> In the second chapter, in the case of the Findern manuscript, we posit a gendered reading of Chaucer’s “Complaint to His Purse” in the context of the “feminist sequence” of canonical texts as well as the original female-voiced lyric poems contained in the collection, one that draws parallels between the “feminization” of the pregnant female, the (masculine) poet, and the courtly subject. Finally, The Digby play of *Mary Magdalene* stages a bawdy tavern scene in which the fallen sinner’s body is allegorically invaded by Satan’s minions.<sup>43</sup> Significantly, the play personifies the oft-used religious metaphor of the soul besieged by an enemy, representing Mary Magdalene’s body as a “castle” to emphasize her vulnerability to spiritual invasion, which ultimately becomes her spiritual strength of abstinence. The

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<sup>42</sup> See Susanna Fein, ed., *Studies in the Harley Manuscript: the Scribes, Contents, and Social Contexts of British Library MS Harley 2253* (Kalamazoo: Western Michigan University, 2000) and N.R. Ker, *Facsimile of British Museum MS. Harley 2253* (London, 1965).

<sup>43</sup> See David Bevington, *Medieval Drama* (Boston, 1975).

ranges of genres and modes of discourse – from fabliaux to lyric to religious drama – which represent women’s bodies metonymously as gendered and genital figures argue for the effectiveness of strategically essentializing women’s experiences to her “cun,” “purse,” or “castle” to a variety of ends -- courtly, poetic, political and religious.

## Chapter One

### **Laughing at Chevalier de Cun and Huet de Culet: the Anti-Moral of the Anglo-Norman *Le Chevalier qui fist les Cons Parler* in MS Harley 2253**

MS Harley 2253 is a case study in the investigation of genital poetics in a domestic, trilingual, provincial literary culture in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. In its anthologist impulse, the manuscript evidences a concern with feminine issues, female bodies, gender dynamics, and gendered authority, focalized in its obscene Anglo-Norman fabliaux. In this chapter, I investigate one particular fabliau, *Le Chevalier qui fist le Cons Parler*, as it figures a talking “con,” -- or “cun,” a vulgar word for vagina, equivalent in English to “cunt” -- as the ultimate knowledge producer in the tale. Reading this tale in the context of the manuscript’s other contents and its provenance in a Herefordshire household, I explore its staging of domestic and sexual gendered knowledge and the power it engenders. The female body is represented in *Le Chevalier qui fist le Cons Parler* as the reporter of desired information. It is employed at the service of a courtly, misogynist objective, revealing the violence with which women’s knowledge is usurped and coopted in the world of the fabliau while women’s voices and perspectives proliferate within the tale and in the surrounding texts in the manuscript. Finally, I will suggest how this organizational logic of MS Harley 2253 engages with cultural and social issues such as condoning pre-marital sex, promoting homo-social relationships between women, criticizing the corruption of the church, commenting on the deterioration of the feudal



system and chivalric codes, revealing gendered violence and power dynamics, and encouraging women's readership and patronage.

The unique repository of the Anglo-Norman variant of *Le Chevalier qui fist le Cons Parler* consists of one hundred forty one folios in fifteen quires.<sup>44</sup> MS Harley 2253 is a unique 14<sup>th</sup>-century collection of 116 texts in various genres – from secular lyrics to fabliaux to romance, dream literature, pseudo-drama, a household recipe and a courtesy manual – and in three languages (Latin, Anglo-Norman and Middle English). Many of its individual texts have been excerpted and published in their original language and/or in translation, and Susanna Fein has recently published the first critical edition of the entire manuscript in three volumes.<sup>45</sup> Until Fein's complete critical edition, sporadic and spotty attention to the manuscript has been its fate since antiquarians Bishop Thomas Percy and Joseph Ritson took note of some of its English contents in the eighteenth century.<sup>46</sup> Of course, as Susanna Fein et al. duly observed in her edition of collected criticism on the

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<sup>44</sup> For a facsimile of the manuscript, see N.R. Ker, *Facsimile of British Museum MS. Harley 2253* (London, 1965).

<sup>45</sup> For published editions of excerpts from MS Harley 2253, see Thomas Percy, *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry: Consisting of Old Heroic Ballads, Songs, and Other Pieces of Our Earlier Poets* (London, 1765); Joseph Ritson, *Ancient Songs, from the Time of King Henry the Third to the Revolution* (London, 1790); Thomas Wright, *Political Songs of England, from the Reign of John to That of Edward II* (London, 1839); Thomas Wright, *Specimens of Lyric Poetry, Composed in the Reign of Edward the First* (Percy Society 4, 1842); G.L. Brook, *The Harley Lyrics: the Middle English Lyrics of Ms. Harley 2253* (Manchester, 1968); Carter Revard, "The Wife of Bath's Grandmother: or, How Gilote Showed Her Friend Johane That the Wages of Sin is Worldly Pleasure, and How Both Then Preached this Gospel Throughout England and Ireland" *Chaucer Review* 39.2 (2004): 117-132; and Carter Revard, "A Goliard's Feast and the Metanarrative of Harley 2253" *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire* 83.3 (2005): 841-867. For a complete edition of contents of MS Harley 2253, see Susanna Fein, ed. *The Complete Harley 2253 Manuscript*. Vol. 1-3. (Kalamazoo, 2015).

<sup>46</sup> See Susanna Fein's introduction to her edition, *Studies in the Harley Manuscript: the Scribes, Contents, and Social Contexts of British Library MS Harley 2253* (Kalamazoo, 2000).

manuscript, there is much to be understood about this manuscript's many parts and their relation, if any, to the whole, and to the broader domestic, literary, performative and potential political contexts surrounding the composition and reception of this manuscript, then and now. I will argue that there is indeed an organizational logic to the manuscript's contents within which reading its Anglo-Norman fabliaux (and other anti-feminist texts, for that matter) – specifically, the last comic narrative included in the collection, *Le Chevalier qui fist les Cons Parler* – takes on new interpretive possibilities.<sup>47</sup>

The story begins with the narrator setting out to tell “brievement” [briefly, 10] a fabliau that he describes as “le counte de *Le chyualer / qe sout fere le coun parler*” [the story of *The Knight Who Knew How To Make Cunts Talk*, 11-12]. Then, and perhaps now, this type of tale and its explicit genital references requires a warning, a defense or apology, a gesture that Chaucer recalls when he incites the reader to “turne over the leef” (3177) from one of his indecorous tales to a more orthodox narrative.<sup>48</sup> Our narrator begins by naming the genre of this tale as “vne trufle” [jest, 6], one which he hopes will “solas demostrer” [provide solace, 5].<sup>49</sup> Proverbially speaking, the narrator claims,

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<sup>47</sup> Prior to Fein's complete edition of MS Harley 2253, *Le Chevalier qui fist les Cons Parler* had been published in the following editions in its original language and/or in translation: See Anatole De Montaiglon and Gaston Raynaud, *Recueil Général Et Complet Des Fabliaux Des XIIIe Et XIVe Siècles Imprimés Ou Inédits* (Paris, 1872); Willem Noomen and Nicolaas Hendricus Johannes Van Den Boogaard, *Nouveau Recueil Complet Des Fabliaux (NRCF)* (Assen, 1983); Thomas Kennedy, *Anglo-Norman Poems about Love, Women and Sex* (New York, 1973); and Carter Revard, “Four Fabliaux from London, British Library MS Harley 2253, Translated into English Verse,” *The Chaucer Review* 40.2 (2005): 111-140.

<sup>48</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, 67.

<sup>49</sup> In his study of esthetic distance created by fabliau authors, Norris J. Lacy observes that “fabliaux are frequently begun by stock introductions” – such as this one – “in which the poet gives the reader the necessary cue by referring to his intention to relate a fabliau” (108). He notes that the author does not always use the term fabliau, however, but often “designat[es]... the fabliau by other terms, such as

“quant um parle de trufle e rage, / ne pense de autre fere damage” [when one speaks of trifles and foolery, he doesn’t think of injuring anyone, 7-8]. Norris J. Lacy argues that these self-justifying strategies create distance between the *fableor* and the audience, “enabl[ing] the reader or audience to suspend moral judgment, even when the poem treats on anticlericalism or antifeminism, infidelity and explicit sexuality, deception and physical violence,” as the fabliaux of the Harley manuscript do.<sup>50</sup>

No offense, so to speak, the narrator begins to tell the story of a down-and-out knight who “ne avoit rente ne terre” [had neither income nor land, 17] and who “par doner e largesse / anientist nout sa richesse” [by gifts and generosity squandered most of his wealth, 23-4]. The narrator doubles down on the economic conservatism of a common place:

Qe petit ad e petit prent,  
E velt despendre largement,  
Ne purra durer longement;  
E, pur ce, il fet qe sage  
Qe se prent a le auauntage.

[He who has little and receives little,  
And wishes to spend freely,  
Won’t be able to last for long;  
And, therefore, he acts wisely  
Who takes for his own advantage, 26-30].

A financial necessity motivates this knight, and his squire Huet, to travel “par priories e abbeyes” [by way of priories and abbeys, 45], seeking a tournament where they hope to

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conte, dit, aventure, and exemple” in “Types of Esthetic Distances in the Fabliaux,” in *The Humor of the Fabliaux: A Collection of Critical Essays*, eds. Thomas D. Cooke and Benjamin L. Honeycutt (Columbia, 1974), 107-118 at 109.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 117.

acquit themselves of their “gages” [debts, 42]. Inhabiting this economic status of hapless wanderer, the knight and squire “errèrent, 57” – wander or travel<sup>51</sup> – in the summer “quant la flour / verdist... e les oylsels sunt chauntanz” [when flowers grow green... and the birds are singing, 53-55] and happen upon a fountain full of bathing beauties. All of this diction flags the romance or pastoral genres, incorporating as they do the lyrical representation of spring’s verdant abundance. Indeed, as Levy remarks, this playful parody of familiar conventions contributes to the comedy of this fabliau: “The erotic motif of the beautiful fountain... an ideal locus for an amorous adventure or for the meeting of two lovers, will find in the fabliaux a lewdly parodic apotheosis.”<sup>52</sup> Rather than meeting an available maiden from the *pastourelle* genre, the knight and his squire initiate a romantic episode with “treis damoiseles” [three young ladies, 61] that is sure to astonish many [“enmerviller,” 102]. Perhaps the gender imbalance explains in part why the three ladies give gifts, however, rather than exchange sexual favors with the two men.

The knight is given the power to make vaginas and anuses talk, which he tests to his financial (and perhaps sexual) advantage on a mare carrying a priest to his lover, a young *damoisele* in the bedroom, and a countess in the hall in the three trick scenes that punctuate the narrative.<sup>53</sup> In each case, the success of the knight involves discovering the

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<sup>51</sup> For a preliminary discussion of the trope of wandering in the romance genre, and of the relationship between error and wandering, see Barbara Fuchs, *Romance* (New York, 2004).

<sup>52</sup> Brian Levy, *The Comic Text: Patterns and Images in the Old French Fabliaux* (Atlanta, 2000), 133.

<sup>53</sup> Levy astutely remarks that “the noble ladies who subsequently encounter the knight are just as much ‘mares’ as is the priest’s steed: woman and animal are equated through their sexual parts” in *The Comic Text*, 56.

knowledge that the cun speaks. And significantly, this domestic, sexual, private, feminine knowledge is integrally related to truths about the church, regulations of the female body, and feudal power. What the cun knows critiques the church, reveals violence against women, and instantiates fellowship among women.

## **A Century of Fabliaux Criticism: Definitions and Debates**

The twentieth century witnessed a proliferation of fabliau scholarship. Several editions were published, collecting and codifying the genre's texts.<sup>54</sup> Numerous monographs were introduced to academic markets, and countless articles appeared in journals in America, Britain and the Continent in English, French and other languages. Scholars have debated the presumed audiences of these "contes a rire en vers,"<sup>55</sup> whether courtly or bourgeois; traced the relationship between the fabliaux genre and other vernacular literatures, including the fable, exemplum, romance and pastourelle; and detailed the characteristics of the genre such as wagers, tricks and a pervading anti-clerical and anti-feminist sensibility. In more recent years, feminist theorists have turned their attention to these at times grotesquely violent stories, despite or perhaps because of the long-standing charge of misogyny against the makers and consumers of the fabliaux.

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<sup>54</sup> For the most comprehensive and most often cited editions in fabliau criticism, see NRCF; see also Montaiglon and Raynaud's *Recueil Général Et Complet Des Fabliaux Des XIIIe Et XIVe Siècles Imprimés Ou Inédits*.

<sup>55</sup> This is an oft-quoted brief definition of the fabliau genre, translating to "comic stories in verse," and attributed to Joseph Bédier in *Les Fabliaux: Études De Littérature Populaire Et D'histoire Littéraire Du Moyen Âge* (Paris, 1925): 11.

But they have also theorized the topsy-turvy characteristics of fabliaux, which contribute, often, to women coming out “on top.”<sup>56</sup>

Brian Levy’s *The Comic Text* (2000) includes the most comprehensive summary of fabliau scholarship currently available.<sup>57</sup> In his opening lines of the monograph, Levy betrays the impetus for his detailed study of “Patterns and Images in the Old French Fabliaux,” namely the defensive posture resulting from the fact that “many of our texts have always been categorized (or often dismissed) as extremely coarse and highly unsubtle.”<sup>58</sup> He retorts by investigating the arguably sophisticated interweaving of the images “of beasts, of gaming and dancing, of water, of the devil and of illness” that he finds pervading the genre’s texts.<sup>59</sup> He adds, too, that only limits of space in the monograph, not of the fableor’s creativity, prevented him from elucidating other relevant motifs of the genre such as “payment and exchange; cloth and clothing; family relations; and ‘unnatural’ sex.”<sup>60</sup> By emphasizing their technical complexity, Levy aims to legitimize the genre, despite its coarse, comedic content.

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<sup>56</sup> Lesley Johnson’s article “Women on Top: Antifeminism in the Fabliaux?” investigates the metaphorical superior positioning of “winning women” but also the literal sexual position implied by her title in *The Modern Language Review* 78.2 (1983): 298-307. See, for example, Simon Gaunt’s discussion of the fabliau *La Damoisele*, in which “se fame monte” [the woman mounts] her lover when she is displeased with his performance in the bedroom in *Gender and Genre in Medieval French Literature* (Cambridge, 1995), 269-270.

<sup>57</sup> For this survey of fabliau criticism, see the introductory chapter of Brian Levy’s *The Comic Text*, 1-30.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 241.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 241.

The collection of essays edited by Thomas D. Cooke and Benjamin L. Honeycutt in the 1970s, *The Humor of the Fables*, condensed the scholarship of many of the most notable fabliau critics of the last generation into one edition. In it, Per Nykrog articulates a standard definition of the genre:

In thirteenth-century usage the word *fabliau* designates a short story, written in rhymed octosyllables (though a couple of closely related tales are in courtly stanzas), mainly of humorous nature (though some are either moralizing or edifying), and intended for entertainment of a certain type... The corpus of medieval manuscripts contain about 150 tales that correspond to that definition.<sup>61</sup>

As this contradictory and ambiguous definition suggests, there is much variety within the genre and thus much room for debate among fabliau scholars. One such debate is the now long-standing disagreement about the genre's origins and audiences.

As Levy summarizes, while Joseph Bedier contends "that the fables represent 'la literature bourgeoise,' catering for lower-class, popular, realistic tastes," Nykrog introduced a "radically opposed concept, that of fables rooted in a far more courtly, 'noble' tradition, and responding in burlesque form."<sup>62</sup> Nykrog notes the cultural and historical differences surrounding Bedier's choice of twelfth-century texts (which led Bedier to theorize that fables were consumed by the bourgeoisie) and Nykrog's attention to thirteenth-century manuscripts read aloud in courtly settings as justification for his claim that the fables "are works written in the meter reserved for courtly or

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<sup>61</sup> Per Nykrog, "Courtliness and the Townspeople: The Fables as a Courtly Burlesque," in *The Humor of the Fables: A Collection of Critical Essays*, eds. Thomas D. Cooke and Benjamin L. Honeycutt, (Columbia, 1974), 59-74 at 61.

<sup>62</sup> Levy, *The Comic Text*, 3 and 5.

instructive writings, and they are meant to be read aloud in courtly gatherings” (71). However, not all scholars are satisfied with the either/or proposition of Bedier and Nykrog’s hypotheses. E. Jane Burns remarks that “problems of origin, audience, and reception of [fabliaux]... remain unsolved,”<sup>63</sup> and Keith Busby’s bibliographic work on the manuscript histories of Old French fabliaux have led him to surmise that “whatever light further research may cast on these matters, it is clear that the simple facts alone require us to revise our vision of the audience of certain types of Old French literature and the production of the manuscripts in which they are transmitted.”<sup>64</sup> Indeed, Jean Rychner’s side-by-side edition of variant versions of many Old French fabliaux “stress[es] the fabliaux’ adaptability over a wide social bandspread, and thus... warn[s] of the dangers of limiting the corpus to any one class.”<sup>65</sup> As I will suggest in this chapter, the domestic context of the production and reception of the fabliaux contained in MS Harley 2253 complicates and extends both Bedier and Nykrog’s chronologies, suggesting at least a mixed audience of landed and servile members of the household, male and female, possibly both educated and “unsophisticated.”<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> See E. Jane Burns, *Bodytalk*, 65.

<sup>64</sup> Keith Busby, *Codex and Context: Reading Old French Verse Narrative in Manuscript* (New York, 2002), 512.

<sup>65</sup> This quote represents Levy’s summary of Rychner’s work in *The Comic Text*, 6. For Jean Rychner’s edition, which publishes several variant versions of fabliaux side-by-side, see *Contribution a L’Etude des Fabliaux* (Neuchatel, 1960).

<sup>66</sup> See Nykrog, “Courtliness and the Townspeople,” in which he qualifies his courtly vision of the genre by stating, “Yet many of the fabliaux are merely unsubtle stories written in an unsubtle manner for unsubtle people, whatever their social rank,” 64.



The possibly “unsubtle” and “unsophisticated” nature of some of the genre’s texts has engendered a range of responses as well. These fabliaux represent “a non-moral view of the world,” Jurgen Beyer argues, “that ironically reduces all idealistic and enlightening concepts of life and literature to the ‘real’ conditions of earthly existence.”<sup>67</sup> This fabliau worldview includes, therefore, realistic depictions of sex, sexuality and the body that are unprecedented in vernacular literatures, which tend toward the “inexpressibility topos” rather than expressing the taboo.<sup>68</sup> Indeed, the Anglo-Norman fabliaux included in MS Harley 2253 are “some of the most scurrilous of all the fabliaux,” in Busby’s opinion.<sup>69</sup> In fact, Bedier bowdlerized the title of the fabliau with which I am principally concerned in this chapter, *Le Chevalier qui fist les Cuns Parler* [The Knight who made Cunts Talk], referring to it instead as “Du Chevalier qui fist parler les dames” [The Knight who made Women Talk]. Even in a collection that boasts scholarship on obscenity and pornography in the fabliau, some scholars cannot bring themselves to articulate the “deceit best left unmentioned” by which the countess prevents her vagina from speaking to the knight.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Jurgen Beyer, “The Morality of the Amoral” in *The Humor of the Fabliaux: A Collection of Critical Essays*, eds. Thomas D. Cooke and Benjamin L. Honeycutt, (Columbia, 1974), 15-42 at 22.

<sup>68</sup> Burns, *Bodytalk*, 27.

<sup>69</sup> Busby, *Codex and Context*, 512.

<sup>70</sup> We’ll discuss this “deceit” in detail below. See Roy J. Percy’s “Modes of Signification and the Humor of Obscene Diction in the Fabliaux,” in which he discusses the relationship between euphemisms, obscenities and the “opposition between essentially Aristotelian and Platonic views of the world” in *The Humor of the Fabliaux: A Collection of Critical Essays*, eds. Thomas D. Cooke and Benjamin L. Honeycutt, (Columbia, 1974), 163-196 at 167. See also Thomas D. Cooke’s “Pornography, the Comic Spirit, and the Fabliaux,” in which he employs studies of Victorian pornography to investigate representations of women, sex organs, and sexuality in the fabliau in the same collected edition, 137-162.

Feminist scholars in recent decades, nevertheless, have been more inclined to tackle the “unsubtle” topics of sex and sexuality in the fabliau. Rather than reading women in the fabliau as simply stereotypes of transgressive femininity, Lesley Johnson purports that “sexual roles are used in the fabliaux not necessarily to confirm or promote sexual stereotypes but as a valuable means for overturning conventional relationships or subverting appearances in the interest of comic action.”<sup>71</sup> The adulterous wife challenges the authority of her husband in the household, and amorous maidens subvert the power of the patriarchy over their sexuality and reproduction. Johnson observes that “recognizing the function of women in the narratives offers a valuable corrective to reading women’s actions simply as signs of ‘character’.”<sup>72</sup> In the common and thus “eternal triangle” plot of many fabliaux, Johnson finds that “the women demonstrate, in context, a striking ability to turn a dangerous situation, often involving the threat of discovery, to their advantage and thus to come out on top.”<sup>73</sup> Ultimately, Johnson concludes just shy of calling the *fableors* pseudo-feminists, aligning their creative wit with that of their female protagonists:

It is clear that to consider women in the tales simply as portraits of vice is to sacrifice much of their subtlety and wit... Indeed, the strategies of the women in the fabliaux, their use of *engien* is implicitly related to the strategies of the fabliau authors themselves... the fableors realize the possibilities of unconventional perspectives in their narratives and

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<sup>71</sup> Johnson, “Women on top,” 303.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 298. She adds that even if women’s actions were justification for judging their character, she finds that “it is rare for their performance to be simply condemned.”

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 299.

establish the authority of women in their tales.<sup>74</sup>

While Johnson was perhaps the first to read against the prevailing view of the fabliau as primarily misogynist literature, E. Jane Burns and Simon Gaunt further elaborated on the purpose and effects of the unconventional representation of women in many of the genre's texts.

Despite the reputation of antifeminism associated with many Early Modern texts, Burns suggests that we listen to the imagined female voices that do speak in order to discover recursive features and topics. As Burns argues in the context of the Old French literary tradition,

simply by speaking, these female protagonists suggest what might happen if women had thinking heads... we can hear these voices couched within some of the most misogynistic portraits of wives, mothers, and sweethearts... if we... choose to decipher female 'talk'... as more than 'mouthsound,' or more than a thorough ventriloquizing of the male author's hegemonic control... however faintly or intermittently.<sup>75</sup>

Women's voices, albeit articulated through the medium of a male author and scribe in the fabliau, are not, therefore, necessarily or solely anti-feminist representations of female vice. In fact, Burns argues, "each of these female protagonists suggests alternatives to the stereotype of the indiscriminately avid female who simply wants men and more of them by arguing instead for having more choices, more of a voice, more say about the roles imputed to them in sex and marriage."<sup>76</sup> By breaking down the paradox of the

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 307.

<sup>75</sup> E. Jane Burns, "Knowing Women: Female Orifices in Old French Farce and Fabliau," *Exemplaria* 4.1 (1992): 81-104 at 103.

silent mouth/submissive vagina, the fabliaux question gender hierarchies, challenge patriarchy, and suggest new “rules of the game” of love, and of storytelling.<sup>77</sup>

Gaunt takes Burns’s argument further, however, by placing gender hierarchies in the context of other, broader social hierarchies, which he argues are also overturned by the fabliau’s irreverent plots: “the principal preoccupation of the genre is... an impulse to overturn perceived hierarchical structures of all kinds, to reveal them as artificial and susceptible to manipulation.”<sup>78</sup> This does not preclude Burns’s theories from the realm of the possible, but it displaces them to a lesser priority in the genre’s ideological structure. Gaunt refers to the historical realities of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century social life and the fluxes and changes therein to justify his claim that “[fableors] continually undermine discourses which posit stable social hierarchies”: “Increasingly boundaries between social classes were being shown to be fluid as wealth enabled non-noble families to penetrate the ranks of the feudal aristocracy, and conversely former aristocratic families lost their rank or turned to non-noble methods of making money.”<sup>79</sup> The traditional construct of gender, in Gaunt’s estimation, is one of many social hierarchies overturned in this time period by the fabliau genre. He concedes, “gender may not be the lynch-pin of fabliau ideology, but... blindness to the role it plays provokes serious

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<sup>76</sup> Burns, *Bodytalk*, 61-62.

<sup>77</sup> Burns, *Bodytalk*, 65.

<sup>78</sup> Gaunt, *Gender and Genre*, 235.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 285.

misunderstandings of partial readings.”<sup>80</sup> In Gaunt’s estimation, many fabliaux end with not only women but the socially mobile on top, and with the aristocracy and patriarchy in jeopardy.

Studying the representation of women in the fabliaux, however, has its difficulties, as scholars navigate through stereotypical and misogynist treatments of women, their bodies and sexualities while staying attuned to generic conventions, sexual norms and taboos, euphemisms, and the dichotomies of secrecy/publicity and shame/pleasure. Nevertheless, in her study of Early Modern jesting literature, Pamela Allen Brown finds “possible cues for contestation, negotiation, or resistance” in a culture of laughter that she terms “monolithically antifeminist.”<sup>81</sup> This chapter aims to hear the unruly wives, rebellious daughters, powerful patrons and talking cunts of the fabliau genre not just as misogynist fantasies and anti-feminist stereotypes.<sup>82</sup> For all their parodic content and stereotypical markers, the scurrilous fabliaux of MS Harley 2253 articulate tensions between women’s sexual desires and their loyalties to their families, between their will and their husband’s authority, between generations and classes of women, and between competing structures of desire and reproduction, suggesting a set of

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<sup>80</sup> Gaunt, *Gender and Genre*, 285.

<sup>81</sup> Pamela Allen Brown, *Better a Shrew than a Sheep: Women, Drama, and the Culture of Jest in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, 2003): 17 and 7.

<sup>82</sup> See Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus’s “Surface Reading: An Introduction,” *Representations* 108.1 (2009): 1-21; see also Heather Love’s “Close but not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn,” *New Literary History* 41.2 (2010): 371-91. These articles suggest a methodology of attending to surfaces (the implicit accusation of course is that symptomatic readings see through or past them) and “just reading” what is there.

underlying concerns and interests for the mixed audience of MS Harley 2253 then and feminist readers now.

### **The Comic Climax of *Le Chevalier qui fist les Cons Parler*: By Cul or by Crok**

Significantly, perhaps the most obscene medieval genital fabliaux that survive are found in MS Harley 2253.<sup>83</sup> Arguably the most outrageous, and intricately plotted, pre-Chaucerian fabliau found in this manuscript is the *Chevalier qui fist les Cons Parler*, or The Knight who Made Cunts Talk. In it, a knight is granted the power “de fere cul e coun parler” [to make asshole and cunt talk, 104] by three magical women who are swimming in a pool in the woods.<sup>84</sup> He uses this power to converse with a mare’s vagina on the road, a young lady’s vagina in the bedroom, and a countess’s vagina and anus at court. In each case, the talking genital betrays its master, outing the mare’s rider, a priest on his way to visit his “amie” [mistress, 126]; revealing the sexual experience of the unmarried young woman, who has seen “cent / coillouns a soun derere / que ount purfendu sa banere” [a hundred balls at her rear that have split her banner, 184-6]; and

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<sup>83</sup> Sarah Melhado White estimates that “approximately 13 percent of the 150 to 160 known texts” that compose the fabliaux genre are genital fabliaux: they “evoke genital organs in a literal way and present them virtually as characters in their own right. These tales combine literal language and imagery with narratives about males and females in varied relationships to the genitalia: men and women are shown possessing, pursuing, finding, losing, using, scorning, and admiring the gender-specific objects” in “Sexual Language and Human Conflict in Fabliaux,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 24.1 (1982): 191.

<sup>84</sup> All quotations from the Anglo-Norman fabliaux found in MS Harley 2253 in this chapter will be taken from the translated edition by Susanna Fein, *The Complete Harley 2253 Manuscript*.

bewailing the constraint of the countess's (albeit anachronistic) make-shift tampon, which inhibits her anus and vagina from granting the knight's requests.<sup>85</sup> This fabliau imagines a world in which women's bodies betray all their secrets: they tell where priests go after mass; they report who, in fact, is a virgin. And even when confronted with an unassailable *cun*, the knight demands, "Cul cul qe fet le coun" [asshole, asshole, what's the cunt doing, 261]? Women's bodies, no longer controlled by the women themselves, respond to the knight's every desire.

The genital conversation that the fairies promise is clearly a metaphor for sex, especially in the surprisingly least shocking moment in the tale between an unmarried lady and the knight in bed. "The image of the vaginalized mouth derives, in fabliau narrative, from the sensual similarity between the eroticized lips of the mouth and the genital labia," states E. Janes Burns, in a gesture that points to the substance of the metaphor that operates in this fabliau.<sup>86</sup> If the orifices are metaphorically similar – the flappy skin holes that they are – then the parallel logically extends to their respective activities, or to the action verbs that Sarah Melhado White associates with them; telling stories (*contre*) becomes a metaphor for fucking (*foutre*).<sup>87</sup> But this metaphorical relationship between conversation and intercourse problematizes the knight's

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<sup>85</sup> In Cooke's study of the similarities between Victorian pornography and Old French fabliaux, he observes that "women are usually anonymous" (139) while "several sex organs are named, given human characteristics, and can perform certain functions that only a person can perform" (151); see "Pornography, the Comic Spirit, and the Fabliaux." In the Anglo-Norman variant of *Le Chevalier qui fist les Cons Parler* in MS Harley 2253, Cooke's observation holds true, as Huet, the squire, is the only named person, all of the women are anonymous, and the vagina is addressed as "Daun Cun" [Master Cunt, l. 125].

<sup>86</sup> Burns, *Bodytalk*, 54.

<sup>87</sup> See "Sexual Language and Human Conflict in Fabliaux."

conversation with a mare's vagina. Additionally, it adds layers of sodomitical meaning to the knight's attention to the countess's anus when her vagina was non-responsive. Perhaps most problematically, however, the implications of rape linger after the conclusion of this narrative in which, as a defensive measure against a knight's sexual and linguistic assault, a countess "parempli bien le coun" [thoroughly filled up her cunt, 246] with cotton (clearly, a gag so that nothing gets out and a barrier so that nothing gets in). The countess is literally penetrated after everyone "diseyent a vn accord" [said with one accord, 267] that the lady did wrong by stuffing her vagina, and "ou vn long crok la cotoun / fyrent trere hors del coun" [with a long hook they had the cotton drawn out of the cunt, 269-70]. The countess is forced to speak, metaphorically forced to fuck at the knight's command.

The figure of the vagina, treated so violently in this scene, connotes many interpretive possibilities, however, despite the stereotypically anti-feminist genre of the tale. Gendered stereotypes of master and servant break down, as the masculine epithet Daun Cun names the vagina, and as the trick humiliates male and female characters alike, both publicly and privately. Ultimately, the vagina substitutes metonymically and heraldrically for the knight's own name (anonymous until the end of the tale). In the mixed audiences that composed the original domestic context of the provenance of MS Harley 2253 as well as in current critical circles, the vagina functioned as a contested site, sometimes silenced or kept in "privetee", sometimes figured metonymously as women's general insatiability and garrulousness. In the following pages, I aim to discover how this genital fabliau functions in the context of its unique manuscript as well as to suggest



implications for longer sexual and cultural histories that have been the topic of many women's and gender studies and medieval projects as of late. What are the effects of employing the genital poetics of the "cun" in our tale?

In the middle of a three-episode gift/trick/wager-plot, we hear of a bodily rupture that comes as a surprise to the protagonists of one of the manuscript's Anglo-Norman fabliaux, *Le Chevalier qui fist les Cons Parler*. A knight and young lady agree to rendezvous one evening for some sexual solace. This is not just any knight, however, and, as we find out, the *damoisele* has a unique personal history as well. When they are together in the bedroom, the knight inquires of the lady's vagina: "me diez si vostre damoisele seit vncore pucele" [tell me if your lady is still a virgin, 182]. Just as surely as "Daun Coun" is at the knight's "comaundement," the *damoisele's* vagina testifies that the lady has had "plus que cent coillouns a soun derere que ount purfendu sa banere" [more than one hundred balls at her behind that have torn up her banner, 185-6]. While this heraldic image of a rent banner challenges the prescriptions for women's sexual behavior inherent in systems of patrilinear succession, it also answers the question about the lady's (prolific) sexual experience.

This episode in the fabliau accelerates the narrative with relative speed, as the narrator rehearses, "a quoi dirroi ie longement" [why should I speak at length, 169]; the lady hurries "la damoisele ne se oblia"; and concludes when "a plus tost qe ele pout de le chevalier eschapout" [as soon as she could she escaped from the knight, 191-2]. To be clear, the lady and the knight mutually consent "se coherent estroitement s'entre acolerent" [to laydown and tightly embrace one another, 175-6] without shame, but it is

the revelation of the *damoisele*'s past sexual exploits that makes her cry out with regret: "trop su honye ledement e engine vylement!" [Too much am I shamed horribly and deceived wickedly, 189-90]. She escapes to seek comfort from the most powerful female of the house, the countess, who then shares this surprising news with her husband the count.

But it is not the lady's promiscuity that is jarring to her audience in the tale; what is marvelous ["vne grant merueille," 220] to the count and countess is that there exists a knight who knows how to make vaginas talk at all. As in a medieval game of telephone, the message about the *damoisele*'s promiscuity gets lost in the Anglo-Norman translation, for the method of delivery -- in other words, the knight's singular ability to converse with female nether region -- is much more groundbreaking than the fact of a single woman's sexual experience in the world of the fabliau. But how should we read this talking female body part? Is it simply an anti-feminist metonymic representation of an over-sexed woman? Is this a tale primarily about a knight's marvelous sexual prowess? By exploring the history and criticism of the Old French fabliau genre, as well as the unique ways in which the Anglo-Norman variant of this fabliau in its unique, domestic manuscript context disrupts the genre's expectations about women and their sexuality, this chapter investigates the anti-chivalric and anti-patriarchal interpretive possibilities of *Le Chevalier qui fist les Cons Parler*, despite all its anti-feminist potential.

In the climactic final scene, both the count and the countess express doubt about the powers of the virile knight to make the cunt speak. In fact, the countess is willing to wager her body:

Je mettroi de monie cent lyures  
qe vous ne frez mon coun sy yvres  
que de ly respounce ne averez  
a chose qe vous demaundrez.

I'll bet a hundred pounds in money  
That you won't get my cunt so drunk  
That you will get an answer from it  
About anything that you ask. (233-236)

So what precisely here is the debatable issue that is worth the countess's sexual, not to mention financial, reputation? When the damoisele confesses to the countess that the knight has made her vagina speak, does the countess not believe the *damoisele's* reported experience? Is she vetting her reputation in order to save the tarnished "banere" of the damoisele – "cent lyures" [100 pounds] for the "cent coillouns" [one hundred balls] that the vagina has allegedly witnessed at the damoisele's behind? Does the countess's position in the wager betray anything about her own sexual experience? Is this a foolish bet -- the countess exhorts the damoisele to "Tes fet... c'est folye" [be still... that's absurd, 213], after all -- or an honorable one?

The social and public nature of this rather private, genital bet is emphasized, as the knight accepts the terms – in short, his horse ("mon chyval," 237) for her cunt ("mon coun," 234) – and boasts that everyone will hear her vagina answer clearly for better or worse: "qe ele respoundra, de bien e mal, / e parlera apertement / oyauntz tous communement" (238-240). The mouth/vagina parallel that E. Jane Burns traces in the Old French fabliaux tradition persists here and justifies a reading of this genital conversation trick as metaphorization of sexual intercourse, whether pleasurable or consensual, or not. What the knight does not know is that the countess has filled her cunt

with four pounds of cotton so that nothing else could enter [“qu’il n’y purra plus entrer. / bien quatre lyures de cotoun / la dame mist en soun coun,” 248-50]. But this is not simply an anti-feminist joke about a large, gaping vagina like other fabliaux about vaginas with voracious appetites, for example.<sup>88</sup> The protective layer of cotton that the countess has inserted in her vagina would seem to work as defense against penetration as well as an effective gag.<sup>89</sup> Neither is the knight successful when he tries [“assayer,” 253] the countess’s vagina, nor is the vagina able to speak a word.

Paradoxically, by silencing her voice, the countess exerts some control over what her genitalia says and to whom. In this fabliau, however, “Daun Coun” seemingly desires to converse with the knight and to be free from the encumbrance of the cotton. In fact, as the wily squire Huet reminds us, other parts of the lady’s body will respond to the knight’s will [“respondra a vostre vueil,” 260] if her vagina will not. However, in a resistant reading of this scene, Burns discusses the challenge to patriarchal control and masculine authority inherent in the countess’s act of genital silence:

The Knight’s takeover of the maiden’s vaginal lips is staged, tellingly, as a conversation between two men; as ‘Sire Cons’ addresses the Knight as “Sire,’ the woman and her putative voice are completely displaced. This appropriation of female speech and desire is what the countess tries albeit unsuccessfully, to rectify by stuffing her vagina with cotton. Her challenge indicates that the vagina should speak for women, not men... women’s mouths, both private and public, should tell their story not

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<sup>88</sup> See Burns, *Bodytalk*, 54.

<sup>89</sup> In fact, the Trotula manuscript advises celibate women and widows to decrease their desire for intercourse by stuffing their vaginas with anointed cotton. See Green, *The Trotula: A Medieval Compendium of Women’s Medicine*, 91.

someone else's.<sup>90</sup>

As Burns foreshadows, however, just when we think the knight has been tricked [“engynez,” 257], he asks, “Cul cul qe fet le coun?” [Asshole, asshole, what’s the cunt doing?, 261] and the countess’s anus betrays the whole scheme.<sup>91</sup> As opposed to the genital silence that challenges the knight’s gendered and sexual power, the anal conversation – a type of intercourse, if you will – acquiesces to the knight’s request.

This “gross reversal” of focus from cun to cul, according to Thomas D. Cooke, is pornographic and obscene, but it is also the comedic hinge in the plot. In this scene inhere scatological elements that increase the comedic effects or sodomitic implications that re-define the sexual metaphor represented here.<sup>92</sup> A “pudendum that speaks” certainly represents a fantasy with all its elements of masculine wish fulfillment, but the

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<sup>90</sup> Burns, *Bodytalk*, 60.

<sup>91</sup> In a refutation of Burns’s argument in *Bodytalk* that the cun and cul are conflated in Old French fabliaux, based primarily on the husband’s failure to recognize the difference (or similarity, as it were) between his wife’s vagina and the “long ass” of a mysterious knight in “Berengier de lonc cul,” Simon Gaunt asserts that “here there is no confusion between vagina and anus, rather one may substitute for the other” in *Gender and Genre*, 256.

<sup>92</sup> Cooke, “Pornography, the Comic Spirit, and the Fabliaux,” 152. While I see sodomitic implications in the conversation between the knight and the countess’s anus, Cooke definitively finds “no acts of homosexuality... in the fabliaux” (161). As Burns demonstrates in *Bodytalk*, however, there is evidence of social and religious concern with anal and dorsal sex, which would no doubt be recognized by audiences hearing this anecdote of a speaking anus in the context of the fully-developed sexual/conversational metaphor of this narrative: “Penitentials from the sixth through the twelfth centuries often confuse anal and dorsal sex; both positions were considered bestial by the medieval church. Penetration from the rear (‘dogstyle’ or more canino – whether vaginal or anal – was censured as unnatural by theological, canonical, and legal authorities from the sixth through the thirteenth centuries. The nonstandard positions – anything but the missionary pose – were thought to be both contraceptive and more pleasurable” (34). The implication of anal and/or dorsal sex would have been emphasized by the fairies’ promise that women’s bodies would answer “in front of and behind” in *Le Chevalier qui fist les Cons Parler*. See also *Le Dit de la Gageure* in MS Harley 2253, in which the climactic scene in the garden between squire and chambermaid culminates in the squire taking the chambermaid from behind with his “bon burdoun, 77.”

dream of women's bodies betraying all of their secrets turns on the biological and legal problems entailed in the "pryvetee" of women's parts, the cultural primacy of female virginity and the "mystery" of paternity in a society based on patrilinear inheritance. Women whose bodies are conversant with an errant knight are certainly not the stereotypes of virtuous female behavior. However, in a significant revision of the Old French analogue of this fabliau, there is no stated moral to this tale, and no orthodox religious send-off as we often see tidying up the tail-end of these raunchy stories.<sup>93</sup>

The denouement of this adventure ["cest aventure," 285] – for crazy is he who writes any more ["fous y est que plus y met," 292] – rises and falls as quickly as the knight's fortunes improve. Everyone said "a vn accord" (267) – in unison – that the lady has wronged the knight; the *cotoun* was removed from the *coun* with a long hook ["Ou vn long crok," 269]; the lady made peace with the knight at the command of her husband; and the knight and Huet returned to their country ["son pais," 281] to pay their debts ["pur ces gages acquiter," 284], with new surnames: "Chyualer de coun huet de culet," or The Knight of the Cunt and Huet of Little Asshole. If we are to take this speedy climax as any indication of the morality of this fabliau-world, then it is clear that "everyone" is on the side of the *cun*, and indeed the *cul* too, so long as they respond to the knight's demands, and without any regard for who the vagina and anus belongs to: the priest's mare, presumably unmarried damoisele and countess respond alike, whether or not they consent, ultimately. In Cooke's study of the "pornographic tendencies" of Old French

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<sup>93</sup> According to Beyer's calculations, "two thirds of all the works draw a lesson from the tales, in many instances by attaching a moral" in "The Morality of the Amoral," 38.

fabliaux, he aligns the comic climax of the narrative with the satisfaction of orgasm: “the comic climax... is a deeply satisfying fulfillment. At the moment of the surprise ending, we see the full relevance of all that has gone before, and when we see how the surprise balances the preparation, we are struck by the symmetry and harmony of the tale.”<sup>94</sup> According to this logic, then, the butt(s) of the joke seem to be the corrupt priest (a usual suspect in the list of victims of the fabliaux genre), the promiscuous *damoisele* (although it is perhaps significant that her shame is private and that her loss is not doubled by a financial transaction, as the other two are), and especially the violated countess.

If we stop reading there, however, there is something deeply unsatisfying about the lessons learned from this narrative. Simon Gaunt, in fact, finds in his monograph on the representation of gender in the fabliau genre that “[it is often the case that] the [narrative] resolution fails to efface what has gone before.”<sup>95</sup> Does the resolution of the tale admonish women: Do not stuff your cunt!? Don’t resist men’s desires!? Does it encourage honorable men everywhere: Don’t forget about the asshole?! What are we to make of the presumed audience represented at the end of the tale -- those among whom the tale is heard and seen [“entre gent oye e vewe” (286)] – and what do they take away from the text? And what do we? Recently, feminist scholars have pointed to the lingering residue of violence as an untidy remainder left unresolved, and, in fact, brought to our attention, by the defeat of some of the clever women in the fabliau. Lesley Johnson argues, “battles initiated by these contrary wives may end in their defeat, but not

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<sup>94</sup> Cooke, “Pornography, the Comic Spirit, and the Fabliaux,” 160-1.

<sup>95</sup> Gaunt, *Gender and Genre*, 241.

without the tyrannies of male violence being brought to our attention.”<sup>96</sup> Gaunt concurs:

“These texts suggest... that misogyny has real and violent consequences for women.”<sup>97</sup>

As I show in this chapter, the manuscript context of this Anglo-Norman variant of the narrative about the knight who makes cunts talk only amplifies an anti-moral reading of the end of this tale. The selection and collection of other texts written for women and about female concerns, texts that express women’s sexuality and resist patriarchal control, surround this fabliau in its unique manuscript context. Additionally, the differences between the Anglo-Norman variant as it appears in MS Harley 2253 and the six other Old French versions of the tale reveal a concerted effort to shame and humiliate the knight and squire in *Le Chevalier qui fist le Cons Parler* and to ameliorate the critique on the priest, the sexually active and desirous damoisele, and the violated countess, whose patronage ultimately secures the knight’s success in the patriarchal realm and in the world of chivalry.

## **Reading the Anglo-Norman Fabliaux in Context: A Case Study in MS Harley 2253**

In Herefordshire in the early fourteenth century, there lived a scribe who, according to many accounts, worked as a cleric with close ties to a local bishopric as well

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<sup>96</sup> Johnson, “Women on top,” 305.

<sup>97</sup> Gaunt, *Gender and Genre*, 275.



as to prominent local families.<sup>98</sup> His hand composed the last ninety-three folios of MS Harley 2253, or all of the texts in the manuscript that have been of interest to literary scholars for the past few centuries.<sup>99</sup> The folios preceding those in the Harley scribe's hand were composed in the thirteenth century and consist exclusively of Anglo-Norman religious texts. As Carter Revard has shown, the Harley scribe also wrote 41 legal documents in Latin and contributed to two other manuscripts – BL MS Royal 12.c.xii and MS Harley 273.<sup>100</sup> These items and their contents suggest that the Harley scribe was affiliated with the “Ludlows of Stokesay.”<sup>101</sup> Focusing on the homosocial and geographical facts of medieval clerical life, Daniel Birkholz argues that the Harley scribe was associated with the *familia* of Bishop Adam Orleton.<sup>102</sup> And while BL MS Royal 12.c.xii and MS Harley 273 seem to be commonplace books consisting of many religious and practical texts composed over a longer period of time, the folios that the Harley

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<sup>98</sup> See Carter Revard, “Scribe and Provenance,” in *Studies in the Harley Manuscript*. See also Daniel Birkholz, “Harley Lyrics and Hereford Clerics: The Implications of Mobility, c. 1300-1351,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 31 (2009): 175-230.

<sup>99</sup> Ker, *Facsimile*, 15.

<sup>100</sup> See Revard's “Scribe and Provenance,” in which he details the devotional and instructional purposes of Harley 273 and in which he describes BL MS Royal 12.c.xii as the scribe's commonplace book.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>102</sup> Birkholz, “Harley Lyrics and Hereford Clerics,” 186.

scribe contributed to MS Harley 2253 were arguably composed during the period after 1329 but before 1340.<sup>103</sup>

The manuscript shares a number of its contents with other literary manuscripts in England, including Digby 86, and also with continental Latin and Old French analogues.<sup>104</sup> But it is also, of course, a unique repository of a many extant Middle English lyrics and a majority of pre-Chaucerian fabliaux copied on the British isle, for which it has merited scholarly attention to date.<sup>105</sup> Yet those scholars have not agreed on what, if anything, explains its organizational logic: the selection, inclusion, adaptation, juxtaposition and sequence of the individual items included in the manuscript collection. While some claim that the manuscript is a “miscellany” with no apparent organizational strategy or structure, others suggest that the collection exhibits the editorial eye and purposeful formatting of an “anthology.”<sup>106</sup> The evidence for a “contrefacto” method of

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<sup>103</sup> In “Scribe and Provenance,” Revard analyzes the change in the Harley scribe’s “i-stroke,” persuasively concluding that “all of Harley 2253 is post-1329” (57). Revard looks to the two “Montfortian poems [The Flemish Insurrection and The Execution of Sir Simon Fraser] and Trailbaston [which] fit the political crisis of 1340-41, and ... Against the King’s Taxes, composed 1338-39” for clues as to the probable end dates of composition for the manuscript (80).

<sup>104</sup> In “Harley 2253, Digby 86, and the Circulation of Literature in Pre-Chaucerian England,” Marilyn Corrie resists claiming that either Digby 86 or MS Harley 2253 was copied from the other, but rather she argues that they are both “relics of a localized literary culture that flourish in the S W Midlands of England in the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries” in *Studies in the Harley Manuscript*, 441.

<sup>105</sup> See Brook, *Harley Lyrics*. See also Susanna Fein, “The Lyrics of MS Harley 2253” in *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English, 1050-1500*. ed. Peter G. Beidler 12 (New Haven, 2005), 4168-4206.

<sup>106</sup> Fein calls the manuscript a “miscellany” although she admits that “anthologizing tendencies are evident in it” in *Studies in the Harley Manuscript* (8). In the same collection of criticism on the manuscript, Theo Stemmler’s article “Miscellany or Anthology? The Structure of Medieval Manuscripts: MS Harley 2253, for Example” traces the history of critics regarding the manuscript as a miscellany (ie. Brown and Brook), or an anthology based on what he sees as “a careful collection selected as representative specimens of various genres,” or both, as Derek Pearsall terms it in *Old and Middle English*

organization, or juxtaposition of opposing ideas in order to simulate dialogue, is convincing, as Revard suggests, in for example, the sequential poems “The Way of Christ’s Love” and “The Way of Woman’s Love.”<sup>107</sup> Karl Reichl, too, has observed this dialogic method in his study of “debate” poems in the collection, in which opposing views are voiced by first-person figures as if in a debate, dialogue or live performance.<sup>108</sup> Significantly, few have given much weight to the implied audience of the first text the Harley scribe copied in the manuscript – an “ABC a femmes” – in relation to the question of whether or not an organizational logic exists for the folios copied by the Harley scribe.<sup>109</sup> Furthermore, even fewer have suggested interpretive claims about individual texts, or groups of texts within quires of the manuscript, based on a hypothesized organizational logic.<sup>110</sup>

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*Poetry* (Boston, 1977), 113. In “Scribe and Provenance,” Revard claims that in contrast to the scribe’s other two books, Harley 2253 is “an anthology carefully selected and structured to comprise a wide range of interests: aesthetic in the rhyme-craft of its lyrics, religious and devotional in its vitae, hymns and prayers; political in its protests of royal and seigniorial prises, taxes, and purveyances” (65). See Seth Lerer, “Dum Ludis Floribus: Language and Text in the Medieval English Lyric,” *Philological Quarterly* 87.3-4 (2008): 237-255, in which he investigates the lyric “Dum Ludis Floribus” as a microcosm of the tri-lingual anthological organizational logic apparent in MS Harley 2253.

<sup>107</sup> See Carter Revard, “Oppositional Thematics and Metanarrative in MS Harley 2253, Quires 1-6,” in *Essays in Manuscript Geography: Vernacular Manuscripts of the English West Midlands from the Conquest to the Sixteenth Century*, ed. Wendy Scase (Turnhout, 2007), 95-112.

<sup>108</sup> See Reichl, “Debate Verse” in *Studies in the Harley Manuscript*, 219-240. Debates, according to his definition, encompass any “dialogue between two (or more) persons (including personifications and animals) on some issue (or issues) for which one speaker’s position is opposed by the other speaker (or speakers)” and helpfully categorize the secular, dramatic poems that form the object of this chapter (228).

<sup>109</sup> In fact, Stemmler refers to the “ABC a femmes” as a “rather isolated introductory piece” in “Miscellany or Anthology?,” 115.

<sup>110</sup> For an exception, see Susanna Fein, “A Saint ‘Geynest Under Gore’: Marina and the Love Lyrics of the Seventh Quire,” in *Studies in the Harley Manuscript*, 351-376.

Beginning with the manuscript's first copied text on folio 49 – in which the narrator states, “Je froi a femmes vn a b c” [I will make for women an ABC], many of the manuscript's subsequent texts participate in the “querelle des femmes” tradition: they are concerned with the “problem of women,” present arguments for and against women (ie. “Les dit des femmes” and “Les blasmes des femmes” on folios 110 and 111), or figure women prominently in the dialogue and/or plot of the literary texts.<sup>111</sup> In the oft-excerpted and now famous Harley lyrics alone, topics range from motherhood and domestic violence to Marian devotion and female sexuality. For example, “De Clerico et Puella” on folio 80 is an erotic dialogue between a girl and cleric. This *pastourelle* poem represents the threshold as a contested site – the barrier between the priest and the girl's body – and ultimately she concedes to a kiss but not before stalling with a delightful moral and sexual metaphor: “the is bettere on fote gon then wicked hors to ryde.”<sup>112</sup> In another Middle English lyric, “The Meeting in the Wood,” the maid bemoans her plight, claiming that the only alternative to the domestic prison of marriage is adultery:

Betere is taken a comeliche y clothe  
In armes to cusse ant to cluppe  
Then a wrecche ywedded so wrothe

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<sup>111</sup> References to the “ABC a femmes” are from Fein's *The Complete Harley 2253 Manuscript*. Dove lists the following poems in the *propres des femmes* tradition: *ABC a femmes*, *Le Dit des femmes*, *Le Blasse des femmes*, *De la femme et de la pie*, *De conjuge non ducenda*, *Gilote et Johane*, *Urbain le courtois*, *On the Follies of Fashion*, *The Poet's Repentance*, *The Meeting in the Wood*, *Advice to Women*, *Hending*, and John of Wales's *Communeloquium*. See “Evading Textual Intimacy: The French Secular Verse” in *Studies in the Harley Manuscript*, 329-350. Barbara Nolan adds *The Way of Women's Love* and the four Anglo-Norman fabliaux as examples of texts addressing the “fraught problem of women” in Harley 2253. See Nolan, “Anthologizing Ribaldry: Five Anglo-Norman Fabliaux” in *Studies in the Harley Manuscript*, 295.

<sup>112</sup> Brook, *Harley Lyrics*, 62.

Thah he me slowe ne myhti him asluppe. (ll. 37-40)<sup>113</sup>

But it is the husband in “The Three Foes of Man” who wants to escape, for he “hath to fere is meste fo” (l. 40).<sup>114</sup> While the speakers inventory their ladies’ beauty in rather conventional courtly blazons in “Annot and John”, “Alysoun” and “The Lover’s Complaint,” the poetic figure’s adoration in “The Meeting in the Wood” is nearly blasphemous in its explicit sexuality and is certainly controversial when he claims that “He myhte sayen that Crist hym seye / that myhte nyhtes neh hyre leye, / heuene he heuede here” (ll. 82-84).<sup>115</sup> These examples are just a sample of some of the women’s issues navigated in domestic and courtly settings in the Harley lyrics.

The manuscript also boasts one of the few secular, non-cycle pseudo-dramas written in English during the Middle Ages, a play named after the two female protagonists.<sup>116</sup> *Gilhote et Johane* was arguably intended for performance or oral reading, as indicated by the capital letters in the margins representing when speakers change; as Revard explains, “the scribe has set paragraph-marks and capital letters to identify and mark speakers in the dialogue or debate portions: *G, J, VX* for *Gilote, Johane, Vxor*” (126).<sup>117</sup> In this unique performance poem, an older woman teaches a

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>115</sup> Brook, *Harley Lyrics*, 39.

<sup>116</sup> For a discussion of this text, see Carter Revard, “The Wife of Bath’s Grandmother”; See also Daniel Birkholz, “Histoire a l’Imparfait: The Counterfactual Lessons of Harley 2253,” *Exemplaria: A Journal of Theory in Medieval & Renaissance Studies* (2015): 273-306. Other secular non-cycle plays include, for example, *Dame Sirith* in Digby 86.

younger woman how to deceive her husband so that she can do what she wants; then they go out and educate other women about how to run their households similarly.

In addition to individual prose romance, dream and pilgrimage texts, the manuscript includes a group of five Anglo-Norman fabliaux, two of which have no old French analogues.<sup>118</sup> These “scurrilous” joke stories represent over-sexed, deceptive, and garrulous women in their narratives. In *Des Trois Dames*, readers encounter a female-only cast in which a *vit* is found on the road, and the women fight about who wants it more until finally an abbess acquires it for her abbey. In *Du Chevalier a la Corbeille*, we hear of a knight and squire who scheme to get inside a lady’s bower by means of a basket rigged on a pulley system.<sup>119</sup> The young people thwart the efforts of the old woman whose job was to protect the lady’s honor, and end up under the covers, which shakes and turns (“crouler e torner,” 205) all night. In *Le Dit de la Gageure* and *Le Chevalier qui fist les Cons Parler*, however, it is not the women successfully doing the tricking in each tale, but rather they are the ones getting tricked. At the end of *Le Dit de la Gageure*, (or “The Wager”), a chambermaid who was planning to get kissed on the *cul*, finds herself instead

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<sup>117</sup> See “*Gilote et Johane*: an Interlude in B.L. MS Harley 2253,” *SP* 79 (1982): 126. Letters and paragraph-marks appear at lines 115, 141, 185, 187, 193, 203, 260, 270, and 319. Interestingly, Revard notes, “the marks at 203 and 319 are not beside dialogue, but show where the Narrator takes over from the debators.”

<sup>118</sup> For a sustained discussion of the group of fabliaux included in MS Harley 2253, see Barbara Nolan, “Anthologizing Ribaldry.” Of these fabliaux, *Le Dit de la Gageure* and *Du Chevalier a La Corbeille* are unique.

<sup>119</sup> Frederick M. Biggs suggests that this fabliau may have been read by Chaucer and influenced the comic scene in the Miller’s tale which depends upon a similar hoisting/falling apparatus in “A Bared Bottom and a Basket: A New Analogue and a New Source for the *Miller’s Tale*,” *Notes and Queries* (2009): 340-1.

a victim of a voyeuristic rape. And in *Le Chevalier qui fist les Cons Parler*, a knight is given powers “de fere cul e coun parler” [to make asshole and cunt talk, 104], which he uses to extort money from a corrupt priest, to shame a promiscuous *damoisele* in the bedroom, and ultimately to defeat a countess in a public wager that puts her violated body on display. How are we to interpret these violent, anti-feminist texts in their situated contexts? If the presumed audience of the “ABC a femmes” is the same audience of the fabliaux, and if, in fact, a local and/or global organizational logic is at work in the quires containing the fabliaux and/or in the manuscript as a whole, then the interpretive possibilities may be less limited than some have suggested.<sup>120</sup>

Surely the virgin/whore dichotomy is at work here as women are alternately praised and damned. Mary’s body and tears, holy and maternal as they are, are juxtaposed to the “tyttes... whittore then the moren-mylk” of a love so “wilde” and “briht” that “hey mythe saye.. hevene he hevede here”.<sup>121</sup> Does the contrefacto, pro and contra, pseudo-feminist tit for every anti-feminist tat result in a zero-sum game, a politically neutral inclusion of diverse opinion – as Chaucer quips, “diverse folk diversely they demed” (202).<sup>122</sup> Close attention to the recurrent tropes and topics in the quires containing the fabliaux, in particular, and in the manuscript as a whole, suggests that the compiler of MS Harley 2253 carefully collected texts that engaged specifically with the

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<sup>120</sup> Barbara Nolan, for example, prioritizes the “antifeminist implications” of the “nether voices” in her interpretation of *Le Chevalier qui fist les Cons Parler*, specifically, in “Anthologizing Ribaldry,” 324.

<sup>121</sup> Brook, *Harley Lyrics*, 35.

<sup>122</sup> Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, 171.

debate about women's characteristics, their sexuality, and models of virtue and vice.

These texts are proximate to, and their interpretation should be influenced by, the included political and satirical texts, which voice resistant (and often parodic) attitudes toward powerful social constructs and institutions such as chivalry, patriarchy and the church.

Of the manuscript's one hundred and forty one leaves and fifteen quires, there are three groups of quires that form continuous independent blocks, with texts beginning at the end of one quire and continuing on to the next quire – what Barbara Nolan terms “interlinked quires.”<sup>123</sup> This interlinking suggests that these texts were copied together, rather than exhibiting evidence of a random collection of individual texts on separate folios. The first four quires contain the late thirteenth-century texts not composed by the Harley scribe.<sup>124</sup> The second independent group consists of quires 7-11, a group of 44 texts, 34 of which are Middle English verse. The final independent group consists of quires 12-14 and contains 26 texts, 16 of which are French verse and prose, including all of the Anglo-Norman fabliaux and a number of other French and English poems before ending with the French and Latin didactic and religious prose that concludes the

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<sup>123</sup> Nolan, “Anthologizing Ribaldry,” 291.

<sup>124</sup> Some argue that this is actually a separate manuscript bound together with the contents composed by the Harley scribe at some point in the book's history before it was acquired for the Harleian library in 1723. See Ker, *Facsimile*, xx.



manuscript, with one exception: the inclusion of the French and Latin verse “Against the King’s Taxes,” which is included in quire 15 on f. 137v.<sup>125</sup>

If observing patterns and breaks in patterns is significant at all in determining the organizational logic of an anthology, then it seems that the majority English-verse block is followed by a French-verse block in MS Harley 2253.<sup>126</sup> In addition to the language difference, this distinction extends to potential generic and thematic differences between the quires as well. While many have pointed to the juxtaposition of the English verses “The Way of Christ’s Love” and “The Way of Woman’s Love” on folio 128 as the lynchpin holding the manuscript together, or as the prism through which interpretation of the manuscript’s texts becomes clear, it seems rather that the satiric, ribaldrous and critical tone of the fabliaux and of other poems in the fabliaux-block such as “Trailbaston,” “Ordre de bel ayse,” and “Satire on the Retinues of the Great” reflect the organizational logic of this group of quires. The placement of women’s voices alongside other voices critical of society, politics and late medieval feudal government in this block of quires is the object of investigation in this chapter.

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<sup>125</sup> Nolan discusses the fabliaux as a group but not the other texts in the independent block although she argues that like Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, “the material book, presented as an anthology, virtually requires us to read backwards and forward, to compare, contrast and recollect the details of a particular range of well-known texts and kinds of text” in “Anthologizing Ribaldry,” 327. Kennedy’s dissertation translates a number of the items from quires 12-14 under the heading “Anglo-Norman Poems about Love, Women and Sex.” In “Miscellany or Anthology?,” Theo Stemmler, on the other hand, claims that “no coherent plan may be discerned” in the arrangement of items 70-93 in the manuscript (119). Included in this group of items are those texts in quires 12-14 that I am calling the fabliaux-block.

<sup>126</sup> Of course, the texts in these blocks, respectively, are not exclusively lyrics or fabliaux, but their presence in these groups, rather than spread totally sporadically throughout the manuscript’s folios, is surely significant.

The two texts that straddle quires in the fabliaux-block – and thus the glue that holds the block together – are the critical and satirical poems “Trailbaston” and “Ordre de bel ayse.”<sup>127</sup> The “Outlaw’s song of Traillebaston” is a first-person complaint about Edward I’s ordinance of Traillebaston, purportedly written in the “vert bois de Belregard” [green woods of Belregard, 54] and “gitte en haut chemyn, qe um le dust trover” [cast in the highway, that people may find it, 98].<sup>128</sup> So it is not just a fair maiden who can be met in the wood, and not just a *vit* that can be found along the road.<sup>129</sup> The outlaw resigns to live outside of society’s boundaries and “la commune loy” (56) rather than submit to the “fauce bouches” (22) of his friends, pay the sheriff’s “raunsoun” (13), or suffer in prison “en garde de le evesque” (60). “La chose” (3) that the outlaw chooses to set to rhyme is not, in fact, the same “bele chose” that predominates Chaucer’s *Wife of Bath’s Prologue* and *Tale*, or even the several male and female “things” with which the fabliau are concerned. Yet the outlaw’s song sets up, at times word-for-word, the disgruntled voices that follow in the fabliau-block.

We hear the same impassioned call to a sympathetic audience as commences *Les dit des femmes* when the outlaw cries: “ore agardez, seigneures, est-ce resoun?” (16). The speaker wants the same freedom that the knight and squire exhibit in *Le Chevalier qui*

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<sup>127</sup> In John Scattergood’s article “Authority and Resistance: The Political Verse” in Fein’s *Studies in the Harley Manuscript*, he suggests that the voice of “provincial resistance” in Trailbaston is “possibly ironized” (188).

<sup>128</sup> Wright, *Political Songs of England*, 231-236.

<sup>129</sup> I’m referring here to the Middle English lyric, “The Fair Maid of Ribblesdale,” who was met in the “woods” and to the Anglo-Norman fabliau “Les Trois Dames,” who found the *vit* in the road.

*fist les Cons Parler*: “a mon pais chevalcher e aler” (30).<sup>130</sup> Rather than playing the game of love as the friars in the *Ordre de Bel Ayse* do [“le giw d’amour,” 126], the outlaw is forced to participate in “le giw de Traylebastoun” (37), but as we hear in some of the subsequent fabliaux, the two result in similar end-games. “Les male leis” (68) that haunt the outlaw cause problems “entre mon lignage” (69), just as the wife’s disappointment with her husband’s “Lignage” in *Le Dit de la Gageure* catalyzes the fabliau-action in that poem. The most significant foregrounding that the Outlaw’s song provides for what follows in MS Harley 2253’s fabliau-block of quires 12-14, however, comes in the form of an indictment against its unsympathetic readers. “Si tu sachez de lettrure e estes corouce” [if you know letters and are enraged, 57], then the outlaw entreats readers to stay with him “abois” (63) – out of the reach of all those agents of the monarchy, church and patriarchy. The speaker warns the reader “quy le mieux puet eslyre,” [who has the opportunity to select what is better] that he is a fool [“fol” (66)] who does not choose to follow the outlaw. Furthermore, and in line with the great Boethian tradition of fortune’s rises and falls, the outlaw claims: “le siècle est si variant, fous est qe s’affye” [The world is so variable, that he is a fool who trusts in it, 82]. The outlaw understands what those displaced members of society perennially hope for: that those in power now will not always be, that the bad laws and common customs that keep populations down now will be overturned someday.

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<sup>130</sup> The knight and squire, after earning hefty rewards from the priest and countess in *Le Chevalier qui fist les Cons Parler*, vow to return to “mon pais” to pay their debts. While Wright translates the above quoted lines here as “to ride and go at my peace,” later in the poem he translates a similar line (92) as “to go and ride to my country” in *Political Songs of England*.

One of the most powerful institutions in medieval society – the church – is the target of the critique in the next poem, “Ordre de Bel Ayse,” which links quires 13 and 14. This is also the text that immediately precedes the object of this study, the fabliau *Le Chevalier qui fist les Cons Parler*. But what light can the poem critical of religious orders shed on the raunchy joke story that follows? More than one might think, it turns out. The first butt of the joke in *Le Chevalier qui fist les Cons Parler*, after all, is a priest whose affairs with his “amie” are revealed by the knight’s trick. And in the *Ordre de Bel Ayse*, it is precisely those over-sexed, gluttonous priests whose activities are satirized by the speaker of the poem.

In “The Outlaw’s Song,” the fabliaux, and other “performance poems” in the manuscript, characters voice their perspectives in a monologic, and at times dialogic, manner. While the speakers vary from ardent lover and hesitant maiden to experienced tutor and virginal student to empowered knight and bewitched mare’s vagina, the dialogic model of position and opposition accurately describes many of these performative texts individually as well as articulates the arrangement of and relationship between texts in the Harley manuscript. Although Barbara Nolan argues that these ribaldries were reserved for silent, clerical, anti-feminist study, the layout and dramatic cues of some of the other unique texts in this “women’s group” indicate that they were intended for performance and oral recitation.<sup>131</sup> Thus, whether one calls them debates or performance

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<sup>131</sup> Recall, for example, the performance cues of *Gilote and Johane*. In “Anthologizing Ribaldry,” Nolan places the fabliaux primarily in the milieu of the manuscript’s scribe, arguably an educated cleric, whose experience with a culture of anti-feminist texts and with silent study would have been vast. For a discussion of the relationship between private devotional reading and public performance,

poems, many of the texts included in MS Harley 2253 – and especially the fabliaux that are the primary object of this chapter -- articulate various female desires and their oppositions, as well as highlight the embodied nature of this discourse through its performativity.

The domestic context of the performance of *Le Chevalier qui fist les Cons Parler* begs the question of who is listening to this fabliau, and to what effects?<sup>132</sup> Susanna Fein's recent work on the Harley compiler supports a performative context for the manuscript's reception. She terms the Harley scribe a "'producer' – with an evident plan towards recitation, performance, or other practical use (such as preaching or counsel) in a multilingual and social setting."<sup>133</sup> Additionally, she calls for further research into the interpretive effects of this domestic-dramatic setting: "When self-consciously literate poems, that is, poems composed with stanzaic and alliterative virtuosity, offer monologues from a rustic, discontented, yet aspirant class of poorly educated English folk, [to which I would add an aspirant class of single women and widows], would not

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however, see Jessica Brantley, "Envisioning Dialogue in Performance" in *Reading in the Wilderness: Private Devotion and Public Performance in Late Medieval England* (Chicago, 2008).

<sup>132</sup> For a case study of female readership, patronage and authorship in a domestic context, see Sarah McNamer, "Female Authors, Provincial Setting: The Re-Versing of Courtly Love in the Findern Manuscript" *Viator* 22 (1991): 279-310. Recently, Ingrid Nelson argued for a methodology of "lateral philology... focused on restoring relationships between a text and its social context, and between the individuals who live within that context" in "Performance of Power in Medieval English Households: The Case of the Harrowing of Hell" *JEGP* 112.1 (January 2013): 48-69.

<sup>133</sup> Evidence of this plan includes, for example, the lyrics grouped according to metre (#42-43, 64-66), which can be sung to the same tune. Furthermore, she points to the fact that "each of the political texts opens as a minstrel song" in order to support the oral, performative purpose of Harley 2253 (78). See "Compilation and Purpose in MS Harley 2253," in *Essays in Manuscript Geography: Vernacular Manuscripts of the English West Midlands from the Conquest to the Sixteenth Century*, ed. Wendy Scase (Turnhout, 2007), 68.

such poems call attention to intimate social disparities?” (92). Of course they would. Fein provocatively concludes that the Harley scribe consciously validated women’s speech precisely by committing it to writing: “the ephemeral utterance is granted material presence and visual space in a book, where it enters the literate culture of both the speaking narrator and the Harley compiler. Inscription itself becomes fraught with the power it confers to the illiterate speaker, power that he [or she!] might obtain by proxy” (93). Thus, the silenced voices, deliberately excluded from powerful positions of authorship and authority, bubble up in the dramatic performances of the Harley manuscript in which physical bodies are afforded the opportunity to ventriloquize articulations of female sexualities that resist surveillance, categorization and restraint while challenging fundamental structures of patriarchal control such as sexual economy, marriage, procreation and limits of female pleasure and desire.<sup>134</sup> The Harley scribe selected and included many texts that voice female perspectives and highlight women’s issues in MS Harley 2253, a literary anthology with an audience of “femmes,” a number of satiric critiques of power, and some of the raunchiest extant Anglo-Norman fabliaux. Each text is a point in the manuscript matrix, multiplying the themes and critiques that appear across the Harley manuscript and beyond.

## **Old French Analogues and the Variant Anglo-Norman Text**

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<sup>134</sup> Accusations and prohibitions against women reading particular genres and/or texts abound for precisely these reasons.

The adventure of the powerful knight who speaks to women's genitals is recorded in seven manuscripts, six of which are written in Old French and only one of which is inscribed in the Anglo-Norman dialect in MS Harley 2253.<sup>135</sup> In addition to the linguistic uniqueness, however, the version of the tale extant in the Harley manuscript differs from its Old French analogues thematically as well. While Roy J. Percy aptly describes *Le Chevalier qui fist les Cons Parler* as a narrative that “promiscuously integrate[s] both [the obscenely vulgar... and the refined courtly] styles within the confines of a single text,” the Anglo-Norman variant is significantly less anti-clerical and also features noticeably fewer lines describing courtly details than the Old French versions. These changes to the substance of the tale as it survives in the other six manuscripts have the effect of re-directing the laughter away from the priest – an easy and regular target of the fabliau – as well as de-stabilizing the social position of the noble characters, making them more susceptible and vulnerable to comic reproach.<sup>136</sup>

In the first scene in the fabliau as it is recorded in MS Harley 2253, we see the knight and the squire leverage their sexual power over three bathing women who they encounter in the woods. As other critics have observed, the threat (and actual occurrence) of rape in the woods is familiar territory for the *pastourelle* genre, the motifs of which this fabliau's “commencement” is activating when the knight and his squire

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<sup>135</sup> See Jean Rychner, *Contribution a L'Etude des Fabliaux* (Neuchatel, 1960). In this edition, Rychner publishes side-by-side Versions C (Hamilton 257), A (Fr. 837), I (Fr. 25545), M (Harley 2253), and E (Fr. 1593) of the fabliau *Du Chevalier qui fit les Cons Parler*.

<sup>136</sup> Although Anne Elizabeth Cobby argues that in “MS M... loss of a consistent courtly reference greatly diminishes the quantity and quality of its humour,” as I will postulate, Cobby's inattention, especially, to the end of the variant in MS Harley 2253, unfortunately, causes her to miss the best joke in *Ambivalent Conventions: Formula and Parody in Old French* (Atlanta, 1995).

Huet come across three naked, vulnerable women outside of the home and of the village, unprotected by father, husband or king.<sup>137</sup> It perhaps comes as a relief to the reader that when Huet sees three wise, courteous and very beautiful women bathing [“treis damoiseles sages cortoisies e tresbeles... baynerent,” 61-63], all he schemes to do is steal their clothes [“lur despoille enporta,” 70] and bribe them for their return.<sup>138</sup> This is the economics of the initial gambit: the squire threatens to “la despoille gardereit” [keep the clothes, 74]; the ladies “crierent a le cheualer” [cried out to the knight, 75]; he is in the position of “deliverer” of the clothes; and thus the knight is deserving of such a “guerdoun” [gift, 79] that he would “feel nothing but thanks for them” (as if the women merited any other feelings from the pair of men since they happened upon them in the brook). Although the squire is nominally responsible for the theft, the knight is certainly complicit and even grateful for the gains that follow.

In the Old French versions, however, the squire’s dishonorable behavior is neither endorsed nor leveraged by the knight in exchange for a reward. Huet rides ahead of the knight and finds the naked women, “lor robes riches et lor chemises... qui erent batues a or: / Bien valoent un grant tresor” [their clothes... so rich in stuff and embroidery, and trimmed in gold and made to pleasure, they surely were worth a very treasure, 117, 119-

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<sup>137</sup> See Gale Sigal, “Courtied in the Country: Woman’s Precarious Place in the Troubadours’ Lyric Landscape,” in *Text and Territory: Geographical Imagination in the European Middle Ages*, eds. Sylvia Tomasch and Sealy Gilles (Philadelphia, 1998), 185-206; and Geri L. Smith, *The Medieval French Pastourelle Tradition: Poetic Motivations and Generic Transformations* (Gainesville, 2009).

<sup>138</sup> The Ovidian nod here to Diana and Acteon, too, suggests a sexual, maybe even reproductive, meeting in the wood.



120].<sup>139</sup> When the knight discovers Huet's theft, he claims that he has committed a "trop grant vilenie" (146) and despite Huet's protests, demands that he return the fairies' clothes.<sup>140</sup> Arguing that "an introductory laudatory description of a knight may be in ironic contrast to this later behavior," Benjamin L. Honeycutt claims that the knight is observing strict courtly standards here as the squire is "severely reprimanded by the knight, who insists that such a crime is not at all in keeping with his code of conduct and that it will contribute nothing to his reputation."<sup>141</sup> When the "fees" [fairies, 116] offer him gifts, the knight is astonished, incredulous, and ashamed at what they proffer, and he ultimately rides away.<sup>142</sup>

The Anglo-Norman version, however, indicates that the knight articulates "grant mercis" (109) upon receipt of the strange, arguably sexual, and obscene gifts. The three

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<sup>139</sup> See Rychner, *Contribution*, 43-44. I quote from Version C, which is translated into English by Robert Hellman and Richard O'Gorman in their edition of *Fabliaux: Ribald Tales from the Old French* (New York, 1963).

<sup>140</sup> Rychner, *Contribution*, 44.

<sup>141</sup> See Benjamin L. Honeycutt, "The Knight and His World as Instruments of Humor in the Fabliaux," in *The Humor of the Fabliaux: A Collection of Critical Essays*, 75-92 at 92 and 77, respectively. While I agree, in principle, with Honeycutt's observation that "high-principled conduct in one instance may be humorously opposed by contemptible deportment on another occasion; abrupt shifts in tone quickly remove us from the atmosphere of the epic or courtly romance to the world of the fabliau; finally, the knight frequently violates that high standard of conduct cultivated in both epic and romance and therefore expected of one in his position" and that "These features of parodic antiphrastic humor are an essential ingredient of the fabliaux and are basic to their structural design," the Old French versions of *Le Chevalier qui fist Les Cons Parler* seem to maintain the knight's chivalrous characteristics more or less throughout the fabliau whereas the Anglo-Norman variant breaks down the courtly aspects of the knight's character from the onset of the narrative, to greater comic effects at the knight's expense (92).

<sup>142</sup> Rychner, *Contribution*, 42. Anne Elizabeth Cobby observes that the generic markers in the beginning of the tale point to the courtly genre of the lai: "it is no surprise to find that the three beautiful girls are fairies, and that they give magic gifts; thus far we could be in a courtly lai" in *Ambivalent Conventions*, 44.

women – not “fees” -- present gifts with quite a universalizing bent.<sup>143</sup> The oldest woman grants positive reception of the knight in *every* geographical distance and for *any* temporal duration. The next lady grants a flattening power over the differences *between* women (in age, marital status, and apparently species as well, as we’ll see) – “ne est dame ne damoisele” – and a negating of female desire and love in favor of masculine power and pleasure.<sup>144</sup> Her “down” [gift, 90] that she gives to the knight is that other women likewise will “grantera” her love to him “si sa amour desirrez” [if her love [he] desires, 93]. Finally, the third lady grants “le poer de fere cule e coun parler a vostre requeste comunement dere a devant la gent” [the power to make asshole and cunt talk at your request, both the person’s back and front, 103-106].<sup>145</sup> This last power elides the difference between genital and anal speech as well as the difference, if we take the phrase “dere a devant” figuratively, between private and public space. Of course, the more literal and bodily meaning of the words correspond to the respective speaking parts in the fabliau as well. And when the third lady doubles down on her explication of this “power,” the more assertive language of “demands” -- “de quanque vous lur

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<sup>143</sup> John Hines notices, too, that “the fairy *lande* disappears in the Anglo-Norman version, the magic *don*, ‘gift’, becomes a mundane *guerdon*, ‘reward’, and the *fees*, ‘fairies’, become *desmoisselles*,” but he does not suggest any implication or effect of this difference, whether comic, generic, or otherwise in *The Fabliau in English* (New York, 1993).

<sup>144</sup> Compare this to the Old French version, which specifies that “fame” and “beste” (211) will be enchanted by the fairies’ gifts (See Rychner, *Contribution*, 48). The effect of this difference is that it foreshadows the scene with the priest’s mare in the Old French version. In a way, this scene is more surprising in the Anglo-Norman variant, to greater comedic effect since it is not anticipated by the three women’s gifts.

<sup>145</sup> In the Old French versions, the gifts are slightly different. The first gift ensures that the knight will be “received well”; the second grants power to make the cunt talk; and the third extends the power to the cul (anus).

demaunderez / certeyn respounz avez” [whatever you ask them about, you’ll have a trustworthy answer, 107-8] -- and “certain responses” in the context of sexual genitalia and sex acts, represented figuratively or literally, perhaps foreshadows the violence of the big reveal scene later in the fabliau, as much as it manifests bodily the implied violence in this diction granting sexual power to one gender over another, in toto.

These powers are only magnificent because knights, specifically, and men, in general, are not received well everywhere, always, by all women and all their genitalia. These powers are amazing because they negate any form of resistance. The other problem that these “gifts” solve for the knight is the perennial unknowability of women and their bodies, especially the problems of virginity and paternity, which Western societies have struggled traditionally to regulate and control.<sup>146</sup> If the vagina cannot resist speaking to the knight, then not only is metaphorical intercourse a sure thing, but all the mystery, “privetee” and secrecy of women and their bodies dissipates simultaneously. The knight’s powers, the first time they are tested, quite literally turn a horse against its rider.

Animal fables, romance, fabliaux, and debate genres abound with representations of medieval animals; horses, specifically, serve various practical and allegorical purposes prevalent in medieval agrarian and literary culture, dating back to Western society’s domestication of livestock and Plato’s horses of the soul.<sup>147</sup> What is surprising in its

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<sup>146</sup> See Burns, *Bodytalk*, in which she discusses the perennial problem of “Knowing Women,” in the sense of both women who know too much and men who find women difficult to understand.

raunchy hilarity is the fact that the first victim of the knight's new powers is a horse! When the "iumente" (mare), ambling along with a priest on her back, saw the knight, one by one the three ladies' gifts are apparent in the "joie" and "honora" the pair express; then "a ly del tot se abaundona" [to him they completely abandon themselves, 120]; and finally Huet (again, the fall guy who initiates the distasteful plot action) suggests that the knight "assaier de fere le coun al iumente parler" [try to make the mare's cunt speak, 121-2].<sup>148</sup> The knight exhorts "daun coun" [Master Cunt, 125] not to hide it from him ["ne le celez mie"] but to tell him where they are going, to which he responds – "verroiemment.. certeignement" – that "ie porte a mesoune le prestre a s'amie" [I'm carrying the priest home to his mistress, 126].<sup>149</sup> Figured as a type of cuckoldry, the priest's mare betrays her rider's secret and provides fodder for a critique of the clergy at one stroke. Unfortunately for the priest, the ten marks intended for his *amie chere* are left with the knight, much to the knight's pleasure; in fact, he thanks God for his rich exploits: "a dieu graces rent qu'il ad espoite si richement" (144). Without exhibiting any sexual prowess at all (unless you read the knight's assault and the mare's vagina's

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<sup>147</sup> For a discussion of the role of animal imagery in the fabliau genre, see Brian J. Levy's chapter on animals in *The Comic Text*. See also the *Lai d'Aristotle* about a woman riding Aristotle for explicit sexual implications of the horse/rider dichotomy.

<sup>148</sup> The knight swears "par saint Richer" that he will assay the mare's vagina. Neither Kennedy nor Revard remark on this usage although I've seen it occur otherwise only in *Roman de Renart* and *Le Pescheor*; see Gaunt, *Gender and Genre*, 268. Other significance for this phrase may be acquired by reference to Richer of Reims, Saint-Richer in lower Normandy, or perhaps even to Richard's Castle.

<sup>149</sup> The anti-clerical thematics of fabliau have often been noted. Anne Elizabeth Cobby writes, "the figure of the priest is highly stereotyped; the very mention of him makes us expect a lecherous and usually wealthy character, and prepares us for a tale of adultery which will end with the priest's humiliation" in *Ambivalent Conventions*, 30. In *Le Chevalier qui fist les Cons Parler*, however, if the priest's "amie" is married, the adultery remains a secret. Neither is the husband alerted to the wife's indiscretion, nor is the wife humiliated by the knight and his squire.

abandon figuratively), the knight has procured gains, and only one priest was (financially) harmed in the process. Significantly, the truth that this *cun* speaks is not her – or is it his (Daun Coun’s) -- own, but reveals the secret sexual life of the priest and his “amie,” an anonymous female about whose social or marital status we know nothing.

This is a less pointed critique, however, than we see in the Old French renditions of this scene. In these, the priest “descendi” (254) from his horse, and upon hearing his bewitched mare’s vagina speak, he runs off in fear, leaving his “robe,” horse and “XX livres de bone monoie” (279) behind.<sup>150</sup> Suggesting the strict binary of winners and losers here, Brian J. Levy remarks, “the wretched priest has just lost horse and purse; it is the knight and his squire who are the clear victors (the one takes the money, the other the steed).”<sup>151</sup> In fact, the knight and squire literally get the last laugh in this scene: “Molt riant de cele aventure” (302). While perhaps it is not wise to make much ado of the monetary difference in this scene between the Old French and Anglo-Norman version, relatively speaking at least, the priest loses less (“XX livres” versus “dis marcz”) while the countess, in the last scene, ultimately loses more (“XL” versus “cent lyrvres”) in the Harley manuscript. As I have argued, the focalized emphasis on the countess as victim of the knight’s magic trick and the ensuing court’s laughter is more prominent in comparison to the relatively light treatment the priest receives at the hands of the knight, squire, and Harley scribe.

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<sup>150</sup> Rychner, *Contribution*, 50 and 52.

<sup>151</sup> Levy, *The Comic Text*, 97.

Finally, when the scene changes to “un chastiel bien assis, / Halt, bel e de grant pris” [a well-situated castle, / Tall, attractive, and impressive, 147-148], the courtliness of the place, the people, and their manners are described in significantly fewer details in the Anglo-Norman variant than in the Old French versions of the narrative. Ironically, in the Old French versions, the narrator interrupts and asks “Que vos feroie plus loc conte?” [let me not make my tale too long, 327] before launching on the longest section of the narrative, a description of the “courtoise dame” (330) of the castle, the “chevaliers plus de trente” (331), and, in the I-version, the elaborate supper the court enjoys for some 200 lines of the tale.<sup>152</sup> None of these niceties are observed in the Harley version; rather, the narrator quite literally condenses the courtly bits, for “A quoi dirroi je longement” [What’s the point of saying more?, 169], and skips ahead to the sexy scene in the bedroom between the knight and the damoisele.

Scholars have long observed these differences between the courtly and anti-clerical tones of the Old French versions and the Anglo-Norman variant of this tale, and they have generally tended to judge the longer, more courtly, versions to be better and the shorter, less courtly, variant to be a worse rendition of the narrative. Suggesting the artistic skill of the author of the longest, and most elaborately courtly, I-version, Roy J. Percy argues:

The *remanieur* of version I of *Le Chevalier qui fist parler les Cons* amplifies his account with a long description of a pretty young maid-in-waiting, a classic *descriptio* and *effictio* that provides the *remanieur* an opportunity to display his rhetorical skills, and his familiarity with the conventions of a more prestigious literary tradition than that to which he

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<sup>152</sup> Rychner, *Contribution*, 54.

has devoted his own talents. But the description is quite extraneous to the plot of this fabliau, and its subject without any significant actantial role in the narrative.<sup>153</sup>

Despite its relative insignificance to the plot of the narrative, the effect of this elaborate courtly description and of the other courtly details I have described above seem to elevate the readers' expectations and ultimate judgment (or lack thereof) of the knight's success at the expense of the countess's humiliation in the final scene of the tale. In Anne Elizabeth Cobby's exploration of the formulae and parodic elements in Old French literature, she argues that the courtly tone, topoi, and formulae that are employed in fabliaux set up and contrast expectations for comedic effects: "In this way they bring into the light the contradictions and assumptions of the courtly tradition itself."<sup>154</sup> For all intents and purposes, however, the courtly tradition prevails in the Old French versions of this tale. The knight and squire are not shamed for employing dishonorable means to achieve their rewards, but rather, as the narrator assures us, they are ensured a future of sexual, financial, and chivalric security.

### **The Anti-Moral of *Le Chevalier qui fist les Cons Parler***

In the C-text of the Old French version, the primary focus of the concluding lines is on the Knight's new-found financial stability, his world-wide good reputation, and the luck that brought him this great fortune in precisely the year that he was knighted. There

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<sup>153</sup> See Percy, *Logic and Humour in the Fabliaux*, 197.

<sup>154</sup> See Cobby, "The Fabliaux" in *Ambivalent Conventions*, 34-39.

is no reminder at all, in fact, of the scurrilous powers that he employed to actually acquire his good fortune, the female body parts that he assayed, or of the fees – patronesses, in a sense – who secured his worldly success. The jongleur rehearses a rather conventional conclusion to this tale in the Old French C-version, which shares common language with other Old French versions, including E:

Et cil les rechut a grant joie  
Qui mestier avoit de monnoie  
Et qui si bon eur avoit  
Qui tot le monde l'ennoroit  
Et fist puis tant com il vesqui  
De bon eur tieus hons nasqui  
En l'en qui il fu adoubez.  
A tant est li conte finez. (ll. 603-610)<sup>155</sup>

[And he received with joy what he won, he  
stood in such great need of money;  
and as long as he lived he was honored by all.  
Now wasn't he born in good hour to fall  
Into such good fortune the very year  
He was dubbed! My story ends here.]<sup>156</sup>

While we might expect to find here an anti-clerical, or perhaps anti-feminist, moral about the lechery of the priest and his mistress, the sexual promiscuity of the *damoisele*, and the (albeit failed) trickery of the countess, these morals are elided in favor of a positive estimation of the knight's value at this fabliau's conclusion, at least in the Old French version.

But after everything is concluded, all the genital and anal conversation, and sex, and violence, and shaming, and all the money has changed hands, we hear that the knight

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<sup>155</sup> Rychner, *Contribution*, 76-78.

<sup>156</sup> Hellman and O'Gorman, *Fabliaux*, 121.



has all he needs “pur ces gages acquiter” [in order to pay off his debts, 284], which is the final line before the rather unorthodox, amoral conclusion to the fabliau in the Harley manuscript:

E quant cest aventure fust sue  
E entre gent oye e vewe,  
Sy le mistrent vn surnoun  
E le apelerent chevalier de coun  
E soun esquire huet,  
Le surnoun de culet.  
Chyualer de coun huet de culet,  
Fous y est que plus y met!

[And when this adventure was known,  
And among the people heard and seen,  
Then they gave him a surname,  
Calling him “the Knight of Cunt,”  
And [for] his squire Huet,  
The surname “Little Asshole.”  
Knight of the Cunt, Huet of Little Asshole,  
Foolish is he who would add more here!, 285-292]

From the proverbial economics that commences the tale to the chivalric re-naming of the knight and his squire at the fabliau’s end, this story’s framing device articulates the patriarchal struggle for power in the masculine realm. The trope of wandering, indebted knights recalls the impetus for the fictional adventures of the romance genre. These adventures, not a trifle at all, are what catapult two men into positions of power, as their new names represent. Like many romance warriors before them, the new epithets honor the men’s prowess. Or do they?

The names register the relationship between one’s name and one’s societal value, a system of naming that dates back to Adam in the western tradition. But if this tale reflects the systems -- clerical, economic, sexual, and feudal -- that govern society, then it

also records resistance to those systems. Perhaps the joke is not on the priest or the maiden or even the countess, but on the Knight whose name is synonymous with female genitalia now [a modern day Sir Vagina] and his squire Huet Culet, or the little asshole (a fitting name for his shenanigans in the tale). Knights, of course, are not immune from the realm of parody, as Benjamin L. Honeycutt remarks: “in the fabliaux the knight is consistently subjected to the same comic treatment accorded members of every level of society.”<sup>157</sup> Compared to other versions of this tale, it appears that the Anglo-Norman variant is significantly more critical of the protagonists than the Old French versions allow.

As the Harley scribe copies it, the story of the knight who knew how to make vaginas talk is not just an anti-clerical or anti-feminist joke story; it contains politically subversive and unconventional ideas about class mobility and bestiality, female sexuality and sodomy. The figures in the tale who ensure the knight’s success in the patriarchal realms of chivalry, finance, and even literary reputation are the women – those powerful women in the fountain (if not fees) who assure that the knight will be received well everywhere by every female and that he will command all of their orifices, as well as the countess whose lost wager repays all of the knight’s worldly debts. The structure of the plot in the Anglo-Norman variant of this fabliau does not punish the priest’s mistress or the promiscuous *damoisele*, but rather draws attention to the penetrative violence inflicted on the countess. The differences between the Old French version and the

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<sup>157</sup> Honeycutt, “The Knight and His World,” 75. In fact, he argues, “the Knight is of course an excellent target for this type of contrasting humor or irony, for he can be brought down from greater heights than the bourgeois, priest, or peasant” (87).

Anglo-Norman variant contribute to a reading of the knight's failed chivalry, as he gladly accepts such scurrilous gifts from the naked women in the spring; he assays the first vagina that he meets on the road (not minding that it belongs to a mare); he conspires with a *damoisele* to meet in his bedroom, rather than conceding to his host's hospitality in the other versions; and he resorts to anal conversation, if read literally, or sex, if we accept Burns's metaphorical reading of lips/labia and head/ass, in the final, climactic scene of the narrative. As the narrator assures the reader at the end of the Anglo-Norman fabliau included in MS Harley 2253, the Knight is branded not only as the "Chevalier de Coun" for perpetuity, but potentially also as a knight who engages in bestiality, fornication and (heterosexual) sodomy. Read within the context of the other texts in MS Harley 2253 and the domestic context of its composition and reception, *Le Chevalier qui fist les Cons Parler* echoes thematically with the possible interests of its patrons and readers, and certainly with the textual concerns of the manuscript's contents such as female sexuality, an exploration of the intersections of chivalry, individual desire, institutional critique, and a unique, sophisticated appreciation of vernacular and latinate literatures both secular and religious.

## Chapter Two

### Performing/ Reading Women's Voices in the Findern Manuscript:

#### Gender and Chaucer's "Complaint to His Purse"

From the literal "cun" of the mare, maiden and matron of the Anglo-Norman fabliau we turn in the following chapter to the "purse" of Chaucer's complaint poem. Writing late in his career and life, Chaucer self-consciously references his role as poet and his dependence on royal patronage in "Complaint to His Purse," a courtly and bawdy lyric. As we will return repeatedly to the following lines, I will reproduce the poem in its entirety:

TO you, my purse, and to non other wight  
Compleyne I, for ye be my lady dere!  
I am so sory, now that ye be light;  
For certes, but ye make me hevy chere,  
Me were as leef be leyd up-on my bere; 5  
For whiche un-to your mercy thus I crye:  
Beth hevy ageyn, or elles mot I dye!

Now voucheth sauf this day, or hit be night,  
That I of you the blisful soun may here,  
Or see your colour lyk the sonne bright, 10  
That of yelownesse hadde never pere.  
Ye be my lyf, ye be myn hertes stere,  
Quene of comfort and of good companye:  
Beth hevy ageyn, or elles mot I dye!

Now purs, that be to me my lyves light, 15  
And saveour, as down in this worlde here,  
Out of this toun help me through your might,  
Sin that ye wole nat been my tresorere;  
For I am shave as nye as any frere.  
But yit I pray un-to your curtesye: 20  
Beth hevy ageyn, or elles mot I dye!

In addition to the conventional courtly language, the sensory imagery of sound and light, and the playful religious references, the potentially raunchy innuendo of Chaucer's light purse as a metaphor for his old age and impotence is available to the astute reader. But, of course, Chaucer's "Complaint to His Purse" also includes an envoy, which, for many scholars, has been the ground for historical approaches to the poem as well:

Lenvoy de Chaucer.

O conquerour of Brutes Albioun!  
Which that by lyne and free eleccioun  
Ben verray king, this song to you I sende;  
And ye, that mowen al our harm amende,       25  
Have minde up-on my supplicacioun!

These lines have opened up a long debate about the historical, political and biographical implications of Chaucer's "begging poem" for Chaucer's life and times, and for his relationship with the sovereign(s) of England.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>158</sup> For example, see John Scattergood, "London and Money: Chaucer's *Complaint to His Purse*," in *Chaucer and the City*, ed. Ardis Butterfield (Cambridge, 2006), 162. In 1992, Paul Strohm proposed an influential interpretation of Chaucer's "Complaint to His Purse" in his study of the political upheaval surrounding the deposition of King Richard and the ascension of King Henry IV to the throne of England in 1399.

Strohm argues that Chaucer played a crucial role in the "prototypical propaganda machine... punctuated by deft employment of the emergent English vernacular" that supported the Lancastrian claim to the throne. See *Hochon's Arrow: The Social Imagination of Fourteenth-century Texts*. (Princeton, 1992). Other scholars place more weight in evidence that suggests an earlier date of composition for the poem during the reign of King Richard. Manuscript evidence confirms that the poem circulated with and without the envoy: five of the ten manuscript copies of the poem have it. Perhaps this suggests different dates of composition for each part of Chaucer's poem of petition. B.W Lindeboom has implied another reading: "that the entire envoy is a fabrication" in "Chaucer's *Complaint to His Purse*: Sounding a Subversive Note?" *Neophilologus* (2008): 745-751.

Limits of space and evidence constrain this study from answering when and whether Chaucer's "To His Purse" was composed for the King of England before or after 1399. For the purposes of this study, in fact, it is not essential to agree on whether or not Chaucer's "begging poem" was successful in gaining (financial) favor from the King, or whether or not Chaucer was historically in dire straits during the time of the composition of these lines.

One particular manuscript occurrence of the poem, with the envoy, appears in a collection that has sustained interest from bibliographic scholars and feminist theorists alike for decades.<sup>159</sup> A copy of Chaucer's "Complaint to His Purse" is found in the 15<sup>th</sup>-century Findern manuscript, a domestic anthology of literary texts by Chaucer, Hoccleve and Lydgate, that contains a number of unique Middle English lyrics and a variety of other items for "entertainment."<sup>160</sup> Named after one of the families who owned the book early in its history, the Findern manuscript is the conventional name for MS Cambridge University Library Ff. 1.6.<sup>161</sup> The Findern manuscript attests to a gentry household, vernacular, literary culture, arguably with a female audience, in Derbyshire in the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century. Other texts in the Findern manuscript like excerpts from *Anelida and Arcite* and the *Legend of Good Women* and the unique lyrics composed in the feminine voice resonate thematically, I will argue, with Chaucer's occasional political poem "To His Purse." As I will describe, Chaucer employs the language of pregnancy, sex, empty

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<sup>159</sup> See George B. Pace, "The Text of Chaucer's 'Purse'," *Papers of the Bibliographical Society*, University of Virginia 1 (1948/1949): 103-121, in which he details the extant versions of Chaucer's "To His Purse" in the following manuscripts: BL Additional 22139, BL Additional 34360, MS 176. Caius and Gonville College, Cambridge, Caxton's *Anelida and Arcite*, Fairfax 16, Cambridge University Library Ff.1.6, BL Harley 2251, BL Harley 7333, Morgan MS 4, and Pepys 2006. See also Yeager, who lists the "Manuscripts without the envoy are BL Additional 22139; BL Additional 32360; BL Cotton Otho A. XVIII; BL Harley 7333; Coventry, City Record Office; Morgan Library 4; and Cambridge Gonville and Caius College 176 in "Chaucer's 'To His Purse': Begging, or Begging Off?," 378, n. 25.

<sup>160</sup> Sarah McNamer, "Female Authors, Provincial Setting," 283.

<sup>161</sup> Harris writes, "Giving detailed consideration to the evidence for the origins of Ff.1.6 deprives the accepted interpretation of some of its specificity, suggesting that it is as accurate, if not more accurate, to call the manuscript the 'Cotton', 'Frauncis' or 'Shirley Anthology', as it is to refer to the volume as the 'Findern Anthology'. However, such detailed consideration places in dispute neither the social 'milieu' nor the geographical area in which the manuscript was produced; the opposite is the case – it apparently confirms the origins of Ff.1.6 in a country house just to the south of Derby" in "The Origins and Make-up of Cambridge University Library MS Ff.1.6" *Transactions of the Cambridge Bibliographical Society* 8.3 (1983): 299-333 at 307.

receptacles and the threat of death and violence, language that becomes rife with meaning in the domestic context of the transmission of this poem. Chaucer's "Purse," as it turns out, is not just a political but a genital poem in the midst of a self-conscious collection of Chaucerian, "feminist," complaint poems.<sup>162</sup>

This chapter aims to situate Chaucer's purse in the "manuscript matrix" not dissimilar to the one that surrounds and informs our reading of MS Harley 2253. In the context of the other selections included in this literary collection of texts primarily in Middle English, the thematics of courtly love, unrequited love, love-longing, desire and the death-drive that resonates across the anthology crystallize in this seemingly rote political/patronage poem.<sup>163</sup> The juxtaposition of Chaucer's speaker's begging voice alongside the voices of despondent wives and forlorn lovers challenges the gendered position of Chaucer's speaker. Is the role of petitioner a more quintessentially male or female position, one might ask. Does his empty purse signify merely financial dependence or a sort of sexual incompetence, in much the same way as Chaucer's Pardoner's "male" – or sack – functions? Chaucer's "Complaint to His Purse" evidences a latent gendered and sexual politics in its political discourse, one that is multiplied by its

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<sup>162</sup> Kate Harris describes the sequence of items XX-XXIV: Chaucer's complaint from "Anelida and Arcite," the extract from LGW, the "Complaint of Venus," the unique "My wooful hert this clad in payn," and Hoccleve's Letter of Cupid as the "feminist" in "The Origins and Make-up of Cambridge University Library MS Ff.1.6," 316. Harris does not, however, analyze what makes the sequence "feminist", nor does she discuss the Chaucerian complaint that ends the previous quire, his "Complaint to His Purse" and its relationship to the other Chaucerian complaints and "feminist" items.

<sup>163</sup> The manuscript context might be unique historically for the women's readership context it suggests, but the copy of the poem found in the Findern Anthology, according to George B. Pace, "has the fewest unique readings" and is the "good text" that he prints in "The Text of Chaucer's 'Purse'." *Papers of the Bibliographical Society*, University of Virginia 1 (1948/1949): 103-121 at 117.

inclusion in the matrix of women's books and women's complaints that informs the Findern manuscript.

Whether or not it correlates with Chaucer the poet's actual financial need, the poem claims that the problem is the speaker's "lyght" purse.<sup>164</sup> This conceit sets up an opposition to the desired and desirable state of "hevy"-ness.<sup>165</sup> But Chaucer's reference to a "light" purse also connects to the motif of light and darkness that appears later in the poem. The "colour" of coins in his purse, "lyk the sonne bright" (10) is the poet's "lyves lyght / And saveour" (15-6), an obvious play on the orthodox Christian narrative of the Son/Savior. Without the envoy, Chaucer's complaint is addressed to, as the author writes in the first line, "my purse" (1). But with the envoy, the complaint becomes dually addressed to "noon other wight" (1) than the purse *and* the author's patron-king. Chaucer's speaker positions himself as the effeminized, pleading lover addressing simultaneously the "Quene of comfort" (13) and his king. In a gender-bending twist, Chaucer conflates the King, the "conquerour of Brutes Albyon" (22) and the addressee of the poem, "my lady dere" (2).<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> The word "empty" is never actually used in the poem, although it is referred to as Chaucer's Complaint to His Empty Purse regularly in scholarship. See, for example, Sumner Ferris, "The Date of Chaucer's Final Annuity and of the 'Complaint to His Empty Purse'," *Modern Philology* 65.1 (1967): 45-52.

<sup>165</sup> We'll return to the paradoxical connotations of this word below, as it signifies both the considerable physical weight of something, in this case the positively connoted purse heavy with coins and also the emotional, somatic feeling associated with love-sickness, especially, which has a negative connotation.

<sup>166</sup> All Chaucerian quotations in this chapter are from *The Riverside Chaucer*.



Building on the conceit of the lover-poet addressing his beloved, this conventional language of the complaint genre reveals more complicated gender dynamics, particularly when viewed in the context of a mixed audience in a medieval household. This context is amplified when we consider Chaucer's "Complaint to His Purse" as the first piece of a Chaucerian and "feminist" sequence in a manuscript containing original compositions that many scholars argue are composed and/or inscribed by women. Finally, the Findern manuscript contains evidence of female scribes and/or readers. But it is possible to complicate the gender dynamics in this complaint poem even further by situating it in the context of the other female-voiced complaints in the Findern manuscript, which immediately follow the inclusion of Chaucer's "Complaint to His Purse?" Considering the original courtly lyrics found exclusively in CUL Ff.1.6, in fact, we might hear the thematic and tonal connections that resonate in the desire for a "heavy purse" in the same breath as we hear the laments written by wives for their absent lovers and husbands? What we will find is an echo of the "heaviness" across speakers, a suggestion that Chaucer's complaint was selected for the anthology of women's complaints for more than its author's name.

In fact, we will find thematic connections between representations of the body, of gendered experience, and of sexuality between the Findern manuscript's "feminist" selections and Chaucer's "Complaint to His Purse." Attention to imagined readerly concerns of the Findern manuscript audience coheres in an arguably "feminist" logic of organization at play in the manuscript. The speaker/persona of the poem is certainly positioned as both the traditional male lover in a fin'amor situation and as the generative

artist pleading to his patron, but the gender-ambiguity in terms like “hevy” and “purse” – coupled with the explicitly sexual and genital connotations of the conceit – also aligns the speaker with the empty vessel, with the purse, the queen, who will only be satisfied (ironically) by an unnamed conqueror (an easy stand-in for the last patron/king/conqueror), meanwhile the looming threat of violence and death attends as a figurative and real spectre in male/female power dynamics in the medieval household, as well as in political alliances during this tumultuous time period in the life of Chaucer the poet and of the British kingdom.

In this chapter, I begin with a discussion of the complaint genre’s history and criticism, with a particular interest in the relationship between women’s voices and discourses of complaint. I go on to discuss the organizational principles of the manuscript container of the 15<sup>th</sup>-century copy of Chaucer’s “Complaint to His Purse,” along with a number of other arguably women’s lyrics in CUL Ff. 1.6, the Findern Anthology. Given this “feminist” context, I propose a gendered reading of Chaucer’s begging poem, one that attends to its readers’ bodies, as well as the figures of embodiment in Chaucer’s language. In the penultimate section, I make a lateral philological move to explore resonances of this pregnant diction in other domestic anthologies, women’s genres, and, indeed, in medieval women’s lives and letters. Finally, in the last section, I investigate the counter-historical implications of reading Chaucer’s “Purse” in the Findern’s late 15<sup>th</sup>-century Derbyshire household: a financially effective request for patronage rings with all the feminine trappings of domesticity, including its structures of silence and stasis.

## Complaining [About] Women: Women's Songs and Discourses of Criticism

The Findern manuscript's compilers selected multiple excerpts from Chaucer's canon for inclusion in the literary collection. Significantly, I think, five of the six Chaucerian excerpts are examples of the complaint genre. Included in the anthology are Chaucer's "Complaint to His Purse," Thisbe's complaint from the *Legend of Good Women*, the "Complaint Unto Pity," Anelida's complaint from "Anelida and Arcite," an excerpt from "Parliament of Fowls," and finally the "Complaint to Venus." Although scholars in recent years have attended to some of the Chaucerian excerpts as well as to the unique lyrics included in the manuscript collection, their status as complaints remains uninvestigated. Is there something particular about the context of this medieval household, or about the actual compilers and/or scribes of this manuscript that explains the organizational logic of collecting these selections in one anthology? Before being able to understand the significance of these poems individually as they appear in the manuscript, we must recall the history, provenance and formal features of the complaint genre.

In a chapter devoted to medieval genre, Alfred Hiatt investigates three capacious and fluid generic systems: romance, balade, and tragedy.<sup>167</sup> For our purposes, his definition of "balade" as "part or whole of a poem written in rhyme royal, with or without a refrain" serves to identify many of the Chaucerian texts included in the Findern

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<sup>167</sup> See Alfred Hiatt, "Genre without System," in *Oxford Twenty-First Century Approaches to Literature: Middle English*, ed. Paul Strohm (New York, 2007).

manuscript (285).<sup>168</sup> In any case, as Hiatt claims, “balade may have signified certain poetic forms, but seems to have imposed no boundaries on content” (286). There are amorous, political, allegorical, and moral ballads, sung by courtiers, lovers, outlaws, subjects, and troubadours.<sup>169</sup> In addition, the ballad form is related to other types of songs, and is one that includes many similar incumbent questions about oral and written culture, high and popular language, as well as private and public performance contexts. In the context of the English court, John Stevens describes the hybrid role the “‘balet’ of love” holds as

one of the means adopted by the Courtly Lover to display his personal qualities to social advantage. There was one quality above all which the ‘balet’, whether ‘complaynt’ or ‘praise’, enabled him to develop and display – his articulateness, his mastery of words, the art of courteous speech,

often addressed paradoxically to a real or imagined lover.<sup>170</sup> The Chaucerian ballads selected for inclusion in the Findern manuscript are quite often examples of the “compleynte” strain of the ballad form.

The complaint is an “ubiquitous albeit amorphous” sub-division of poetic discourse, which Lee Patterson describes as the “voice of lament,” which

pervades Germanic and Celtic writing, is shaped by biblical and classical models and rhetorical prescription into the *planctus* of the learned tradition, and permeates both the affective piety and the sentimental

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<sup>168</sup> Hiatt discusses the “Art of Composing Poetry”, in which Deschamps describes the contemporary practice of attaching an envoy to the balade form. See “Genre without System,” 279.

<sup>169</sup> There are too many examples to list here, but see, for example, a ballad in an outlaw’s voice, “The Outlaw’s Song of Trailbaston,” or for courtly and amorous *lais*, see Marie de France.

<sup>170</sup> John Stevens, *Music and Poetry in the Early Tudor Court* (Cambridge, 1961), p. 211.

amorousness of the later medieval period. Given the mourning of the Anglo-Saxon *scop* and the *englynion* of the Welsh bard, the *planh* of the Provencal poet... the satirist's 'complaint of the times'... and the *plants Mariae* of pious and the *complainte d'amour* of courtly poets — it sometimes seems as if the Middle Ages must have been awash with tears.<sup>171</sup>

As Patterson describes, speakers have been voicing complaints — with varying degrees of formality and informality, affect and ethos, about subjects as varied as love and war — for as long as we have records of human discourse.

However, Nancy Dean postulates that some distinction between “public lament” and “personal love lament” should be considered.<sup>172</sup> Indeed, the public form of complaint has its own legal and political history. Beginning with the reign of Edward I, Wendy Scase studies the judicial complaint and its role in structuring and transmitting the literary complaint. Scase traces, in particular, the development of the “peasant plaint” and its later manifestation in the ploughman tradition, ultimately arguing that this “literature of clamour... is closely associated with, and stimulates, vernacular literary production” (4). Additionally, anyone familiar with medieval complaint poetry would recognize in many examples of the genre the “the traditional parts of a medieval legal bill: an address, statement of grievance, and prayer for remedy.”<sup>173</sup> And in Matthews's

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<sup>171</sup> Lee Patterson, “Writing Amorous Wrongs: Chaucer and the Order of Complaint,” in *Acts of Recognition: Essays on Medieval Culture* (Notre Dame, 2010), 181-182.

<sup>172</sup> See Nancy Dean, “Chaucer's Complaint, A Genre Descended From the Heroides,” *Comparative Literature* 19.1 (Winter 1967): 1-27.

<sup>173</sup> Rogers, “‘Buried in an Herte’: French Poetics and the Ends of Genre in Chaucer's Complaint unto Pity,” *The Chaucer Review* 51.2 (2016): 187-208 at 203.

study of political addresses to sovereigns, he investigates the ‘pre-Ricardian’ political verse, at the intersection of oral, vernacular and documentary culture.

While these legal, political, and arguably “public” laments influence the discourse of private complaint poetry as well, Dean has argued for an alternative, or supplementary, lineage of the amorous, or private, complaint tradition. She traces the lineage of complaints to “Ovidian models” from the amorous epistles of heroines in the *Heroides* to letters “addressed to patrons, friends and intercessors.”<sup>174</sup>

Wherever one finds the predecessors of the medieval complaint, it is clear that the medieval genre is an amalgamation of a private, self-expressive mode, a performative public mode, a high courtly form, as well as an artifact of the popular imagination. We hear from, for example, scholars, lovers, singers and saints about love-sickness, spiritual weakness and political turmoil. But, to simplify in Van Dyke’s terms, “complaint is a kind of speech act: the speaker simultaneously postulates and laments a loss or injury.”<sup>175</sup> Whether tears or mourning or love-longing characterize the lament, the complaint voices the victim’s perspective in public or in private, an expression of agency and subjectivity.

Chaucer uses the word ‘compleynte’ in his corpus over 30 times, and in several of these occurrences, the term seems to be synonymous with another closely-related genre of song – the lay.<sup>176</sup> In the *Franklin’s Tale*, the term appears in a list of vernacular

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<sup>174</sup> Dean, “Chaucer’s Complaint, a Genre Descended from the *Heroides*,” 8.

<sup>175</sup> See Carolyn Van Dyke, “‘To Whom Shul We Compleyn?’: The Poetics of Agency in Chaucer’s Complaints,” *Style* 31.3 (1997), 371.

<sup>176</sup> See, for example, the *Merchant’s Tale* (1881) and *The Complaint of Venus* (71).

entertainment genres: “songes, compleintes, roundels, virelayes” (948). And certainly the aural/oral sense of complaining is highlighted in the association of the word “moone” with the act of complaint in *The Franklin’s Tale*, *The House of Fame*, and the *Legend of Philomela*.<sup>177</sup> In each of these cases, the subject who moans is feminine, which suggests an interesting power dynamic in the discourse of lament or complaint, one which finds its foundation in the courtly love tradition of the hopeless lover and the resistant beloved. However imagined or temporary the idea may be, the complainant represents him or herself as appealing to an authoritative figure unlikely to hear or concede to any of the speaker’s “petitions”.<sup>178</sup> In the *Parson’s Tale* too, in another context, complaints are figured as issuing forth from another arguably subordinate position in the hierarchical structure of medieval society, ie. “the povre” (373). In this case, the complaints of the poor will be ignored “whan he harkneth nat benignely the complaint of the povre.” In *The Book of the Duchess*, the Knight complains “to hymselfe” (464), hoping for and certain of no comfort or solace.

In addition to identifying the unbending and “emotionally dead recipient” as a staple of the complaint, Cynthia Rogers discusses the futility of language that the plaintive mode reveals.<sup>179</sup> She writes, “love complaint at its core seeks both an emotionally dead recipient and also the death of the narrator” (199). The speaker in a

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<sup>177</sup> See lines 920, 362, and 2379, respectively.

<sup>178</sup> See the Prologue of the *Legend of Good Women*, in the *Riverside Chaucer*, 363.

<sup>179</sup> See Cynthia Rogers, “‘Buried in an Herte’: French Poetics and the Ends of Genre in Chaucer’s Complaint unto Pity,” 199.

complaint conventionally rues the fact that his addressee ignores his petitions and laments his resulting imminent demise. So when in *Troilus and Criseyde*, Criseyde “wrot in a compleynte of hir hevynesse,” (655) what expectations does she have for lightening her sorrows? What is the function of complaining at all, rather than suffering in silence? For all their possibility of being heard and answered, then, complaints so often, it seems, are about the lyrical expression of a disempowered position, a discourse of protest. Ovid’s women’s songs and courtly love laments about unbending women and Chaucerian complaints have in common that they are written performances of the powerlessness of the speaker in his/her situation.

In his study of the complaint, Lee Patterson claims that examples of the genre challenge the reader to ask questions about poetic identity, subjectivity and about how “pragmatic” an activity writing actually is – or not – that accompany any poetic (ie. lyrical) expression. In this way, he elides the distinction between all categories of poetic expression ultimately arguing that complaint “is virtually coextensive with poetry indeed with writing itself.”<sup>180</sup> If the genre is founded on the motif of the hopeless lover, the resistant beloved, and the futility of the poetic expression, Patterson argues, the plaintive poem is not about effecting results or gaining an audience but about communicating desires, whether or not anyone is listening.

For the purposes of this chapter, I am interested in the implications of reading Chaucer’s “Complaint to His Purse” in the context of the other Chaucerian complaints in Cambridge University Library MS Ff.1.6. Chaucer’s “Complaint to His Purse” evidences

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<sup>180</sup> Patterson, “Writing Amorous Wrongs,” 182.



many of the threads of the complaint genre, including the courtly love tradition of a lover petitioning his beloved, the artist pleading to his patron, and a subject begging from his sovereign. In this collection of Chaucerian complaints, “Complaint to His Purse” stands out as arguably straightforward, political, expedient, certainly not as a woman’s song nor an existential lyric lament. Not so fast. This chapter will analyze the effects of reading this “begging poem” -- one presumably written by a poet for his patron, or by a subject for his king – in the context of a provincial medieval household, one far from the madding crowd of London and the court, and one full of, it seems, female readers and literary minds. The manuscript’s context changes the operative meaning of its individual texts such that women’s experiences and effeminized roles are highlighted in Chaucer’s “Complaint to His Purse,” included in the “feminist sequence” of texts in the Findern manuscript.

## **Philomena and Chaucerian Complaint: Organizational Logic in Derbyshire**

Attention to Cambridge University Library MS Ff.1.6 (“The Findern Anthology”) has increased in recent years, as the digital turn in the humanities, and in medieval studies specifically, has reenergized the fields of bibliographic and textual studies.<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> Beadle, *The Findern Manuscript*, vii .Online archives of library holdings make access to medieval manuscripts more accessible for scholars and, indeed, for the general population as well. Databases such as Early English Books Online contain a variety of materials, too, that has enhanced the field of medieval literary studies. Catalogues of historical libraries, for example, are often found here, and in the case of the Findern manuscript, one can find the catalogue of Bishop John Moore’s collection (in which the Findern manuscript was housed until 1715 when the entire collection was purchased by George I). See Richard Beadle and Arthur Ernest Bion Owen, eds. *The Findern Manuscript (Cambridge University Library Ms. Ff. 1.6)*. Ashgate Publishing, 1977, vii for further information about the

Additionally, the third wave feminist turn in the academy has ushered in an interest in understanding the intersectional identity of individuals, and a desire to return to well-known texts and canonical manuscripts and re-read them with an eye toward interpretations based on gender, race, class, ability, sexuality, religion, or other components of a subject's identity. The Findern manuscript, in its unique provenance, its anthologistic impulse, and its women's readership and likely authorship, is a fitting case study for these feminist and bibliographic investigations.

The Findern anthology belongs to a number of categories of manuscripts, including sharing items or a similar provenance with other household miscellanies and other vernacular books belonging to gentry households in the later Middle Ages. Based on historical and genealogical studies, "the signs are that F.f.1.6 was produced by and for the use of the Findern family and their associates at or in the vicinity of their Derbyshire country seat. It is a rare survivor of a variety of manuscripts doubtless once owned by many groups of people of social backgrounds similar to that of the Finderns."<sup>182</sup> Containing a variety of texts representative of different genres and by various authors such as Gower, Chaucer, Hoccleve and Lydgate, the Findern Manuscript evidences a medieval literary household culture – and not insignificantly, one which, as we will see

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transmission of the manuscript.

<sup>182</sup> Beadle and Owens, *The Findern Manuscript*, viii. Much research has been done on the Paston family, another gentry household. See, for example, Norman Davis, ed., *Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century*. Part 1. (New York, 2004); and H.S. Bennet, *The Pastons and Their England: Studies in an Age of Transition*. (Cambridge, 1991), in which the contents of a book owned by the Paston family is described. They also owned a copy of *Parlement of Fowles*, *La Belle Dame Sans Mercy* and other selected didactic texts.

momentarily, scholarly consensus agrees was possibly composed of female readers and perhaps authors and/or scribes.

In the catalogue of one of the early owners of the manuscript, it is described as “An English Historical poeme”.<sup>183</sup> While we might excuse this broad overgeneralization from an amateur collector in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, even scholars in the past century have seemingly mis-labeled the manuscript’s contents. Robbins says it contains “typical non-religious entertainment verse.”<sup>184</sup> The Findern manuscript, in fact, boasts a broad collection of Chaucerian verse including “The Complaint unto Pity,” “The Complaint of Venus,” and *The Parlement of Foules*, Anelida’s complaint from *Anelida and Arcite*, the tale of Thisbe from the *Legend of Good Women*, Clanvowe’s *The Boke of Cupide*, selections from Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*, a copy of the romance *Sir Degrevant*, a chronicle of “seyntys and kyngys of yngelond,” Sir Richard Roos’s *La Belle Dame sans Mercy*, Lydgate’s “A Complaint, for Lack of Mercy” and “The Pain and Sorrow of Evil Marriage,” and over a dozen unique love lyrics.<sup>185</sup> But I take issue with the typicality of the selection of particular verses for inclusion in the volume. Gower’s *Confessio Amantis* and Chaucer’s *Legend of Good Women*, for example, indeed appear individually in other domestic collections, but, as I will show, the Chaucerian and “feminist” selections

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<sup>183</sup> Beadle and Owen describe the manuscript’s early provenance in the introductory material to their facsimile edition of the Findern Manuscript. We have records of the manuscript existing in Sir Thomas Knyvett’s library in the late sixteenth century, then in the library of Bishop John Moore, before finally being purchased by George I in 1715.

<sup>184</sup> Robbins, “The Findern Anthology,” 611.

<sup>185</sup> For a complete list of items and editions of their publication, see Beadle and Owen, *The Findern Manuscript*.

together suggest an editorial logic of organization in the Findern manuscript's selection and compilation of texts.<sup>186</sup> When discussing the typicality of the Findern manuscript's Chaucerian excerpts, Dana Symons states, "That this volume itself participates in a pattern of 'anthologizing' love complaints, debates, and visions with a Chaucerian flavor is no accident, following as it does on a long tradition of such groupings."<sup>187</sup> However, she insists that attending to the specific texts selected for inclusion alongside the more conventional texts from Chaucer's canon

can serve to highlight similarities between these Chaucerian poems that acknowledge and then go beyond their usual common denominator, Chaucer, perhaps stirring those of us who use this small collection to new dialogues, debates, and conversations of our own with and about these poems.<sup>188</sup>

Of the Chaucerian texts included in the Findern Manuscript, several are complaints excerpted from their original narratives, a point that Ashby Kinch makes while observing that for the Findern editors, revision was primarily accomplished "by reduction" (738). From the narrative of Anelida and Arcite, we get only Anelida's complaint, which evidences a careful editorial concern for concision and focus on the topical concerns and connections between the items selected in the volume -- a topical concern for representing women's complaints in a domestic context.

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<sup>186</sup> See Theo Stemmler, "Miscellany or Anthology?." for a range of theories about the relative "random" versus "planned" nature of medieval miscellanies and anthologies.

<sup>187</sup> See Dana M. Symons, *Chaucerian dream visions and complaints* (Kalamazoo, 2004), 204.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid, 204.

Establishing this thematic, the first text inscribed in the manuscript is an excerpt from Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, Book V, the story of Philomene, which is a canonical work interpreted traditionally as an outcry against gendered violence and rape, providing a powerful endorsement of the female voice.<sup>189</sup> Gower's Confessor tells the tale of Tereus, Procne and Philomena as an example of rape, or how men "take... the preie which femeline" (5549). In the tale, we hear of the metaphorical "wolf" (5533) and "goshawk" (5643) who preys on Philomena, taking her virginity. "With wofull herte" (5654) she accuses her rapist and vows to "telle out al mi fille" until he cuts out her tongue and leaves her to "chitre... as a brid jargoune" (5700). The narrative momentum of the story is focused on the drive to have Philomena "tellen tale" (5670); she imagines crying out "so loude... that my vois schal the hevene perce, / That it schal soun in Goddes ere" (5673-5). Finally, Gower tells us, the gods have mercy on Philomena and transform her into a nightingale, "And in hir song al openly / Sche makth hir pleignte" (5977-8) all day and night. Clearly, then, this excerpt from Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, included as the first excerpt in the Findern Anthology, thematizes the editorial concern for representing women's voices and establishes the correspondence between embodiment, agency and women's speech. The inclusion of other women's complaints, some excerpted from larger works and some, it seems, originally composed and copied uniquely in the collection, evidences an editorial practice that perhaps points to the desires of a complex matrix of patron, author, scribe and audience in the Findern family's

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<sup>189</sup> For the complete version of Gower's text, see John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, vol. 3, ed. Russell Peck and trans. Andrew Galloway. 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Kalamazoo, 2006).

medieval household.<sup>190</sup> If the Findern manuscript is not a woman's book, then at least it is a book about women. Of particular interest to my research in this manuscript, arguably written for (and by) female readers, is the doubly "feminist" sequence of items XX-XXIV, which immediately follows Chaucer's "Complaint to His Purse": Chaucer's complaint from "Anelida and Arcite," the extract from the *Legend of Good Women*, the "Complaint of Venus," the unique "My wooful hert this clad in payn," and Hoccleve's Letter of Cupid. Harris argues that while the insert excerpted from the *Legend of Good Women* is an independent booklet containing a unique hand and watermark, it "take[s] an obvious place in the sequence."<sup>191</sup>

The fifteenth-century collection of middle English texts that survives uniquely in the 159 paper leaves in 9 gatherings is a significant object of study, due to the unique case that it provides of a domestic vernacular literary anthology in 30 hands, some of whom were presumably women who actually signed their names in the margins of the manuscript's pages.<sup>192</sup> We see names such as "margery hungerford," "ffrances krukun,"

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<sup>190</sup> Symes reminds us in her study of the "manuscript matrix" and its relationship to the "Modern canon" that "in the manuscript matrix... no one ever has the last word" (18) in Strohm's *Oxford Twenty-First Century Approaches to Literature*.

<sup>191</sup> "The Origins and Make-up of Cambridge University Library MS Ff.1.6," 316. See also Robbins, "The Findern Anthology," 633-4.

<sup>192</sup> Russell Hope Robbins finds "approximately 28 various hands" in "The Findern Anthology." *PMLA* 69.3 (Jun. 1954): 610-642 at 612. Kate Harris notes 40 different hands in "The Origins and Make-up of Cambridge University Library MS Ff.1.6," 315. There is also some debate about the number of independent booklets. Beadle and Owens note 15 gatherings in *The Findern Manuscript* (viii); Brusendorff records eight.

and “Anne Schyrley.”<sup>193</sup> Robbins finds a total of “five women, three of which are written in the same hands as two considerable pieces of MS. Copying.”<sup>194</sup> Clearly then, we have female names inscribed in the margins of the manuscript, but there is some scholarly disagreement about whether this means that women originally composed some of the texts included in the manuscript, inscribed those texts, or simply read and/or owned the book. Using historical evidence of female literacy as well as internal evidence of the first-person feminine voice of many of the unique lyrics, Sarah McNamer claims that if there is not definitive evidence of female authorship here, then at least “we must certainly conclude” that the women in the Derbyshire home who owned the Findern Anthology “were capable of composing the lyrics.”<sup>195</sup> Whether originally written or only read by women, the Findern Anthology serves as a case study for scholars interested in medieval vernacular literature, book history, paleography, and domestic readership.

Of course, the authorship and the use of the manuscript in its original domestic context is a matter of some scholarly disagreement. While Beadle and Owens find in the manuscript’s “unusual diversity and informality” evidence that “the construction of the manuscript was a collaborative effort involving a surprising number of amateur scribes at work in the same place,” Robbins looks to other literary families like the Pastons who

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<sup>193</sup> Robbins, “The Findern Anthology,” 626-27. In this seminal article, Robbins details the items in the manuscript, indicates when items appear in other MS, establishes dating and family/geographical origin of MS (based on textual evidence including account records and named scribes and women’s names). He also describes the land holdings of the Findern family, its arms, and ties (by marriage) to the aristocracy. Finally, he publishes the unique lyrics that precede and follow Chaucer’s “Purse” in the manuscript.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, 627.

<sup>195</sup> McNamer, “Female Authors, Provincial Setting,” 285.

had either amanuenses or professional scribes to write for them.<sup>196</sup> The relatively long time period over which the manuscript's contents were compiled (from the mid-fourteenth century through the mid-fifteenth century) adds an additional variable to the questions about its household provenance. A primary piece of evidence that Harris employs to refute Robbins's analysis of the manuscript's provenance is a "fragment of accounts" written in a late sixteenth-century hand on f 59v (the back of Chaucer's "Complaint to His Purse"). This fragment records "a rekenyng be twene Iohn wylsun mester fynderne," a surname that is now synonymous with the manuscript collection itself. Looking to this mundane household receipt among the collected literary items in prose and poetry, Harris argues that the inclusion of this fragment relatively late in the inscription history of the Ff.1.6 suggests that "the volume, far from being a treasured repository of literary texts, was readily accessible at this period in the sixteenth century for several members of the household employed in the service of the Findern family to make whatever jottings they chose."<sup>197</sup> Nor was the manuscript a collection after-the-fact of booklets already inscribed, according to Harris's analysis. She argues the folios were collected in manuscript form early in its history (ie. since around 1446) based on the appearance of several hands and watermarks occurring over multiple quires and that work continued on this "loose-leaf album" for nearly a century, "the process terminating with a secondary programme of 'filler' entries," these being the over 30 unique love lyrics

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<sup>196</sup> See Beadle and Owens, "The Findern Manuscript" and Robbins, "The Findern Anthology."

<sup>197</sup> Harris, "The Origins and Make-up of Cambridge University Library MS Ff.1.6," 299.



included in the collection, the majority of which are found in the same quire of the manuscript (folios 143r through 164v).<sup>198</sup> Heavy soiling found on the blank “wrapper” pages of this quire suggests “independent production” and later addition of this quire into the larger book.<sup>199</sup> The fact that this manuscript contains such a collection of now canonical and unique items, inscribed in a variety of hands over a relatively lengthy period of time begs the question of precisely what kind of manuscript this is. Was the Findern miscellany, then, actually an organized anthology, produced by amateur household members over several generations in their Derbyshire home?

Is it an “anthology” as Robbins originally suggested, or a “random” and haphazard collection of items? Was the book a “loose album” from its beginning, a blank commonplace book that was filled out over time, or did the manuscript suffer diminishment of value over time, as McNamer asserts?<sup>200</sup> After careful investigation of the manuscript’s contents as well as the history of the book’s production, the Findern Manuscript’s logic of selection, organization and inclusion of items seems to revolve around an interest in the female voice, female protagonists, women’s complaints and other genres traditionally associated with female readership in the medieval time period, such as romance. Additionally, the thematic concerns of the texts included, rather than

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<sup>198</sup> Harris, “The Origins and Make-up of Cambridge University Library MS Ff.1.6,” 316.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid., 316.

<sup>200</sup> McNamer observes “an apparent decline in the perceived value of the manuscript during the long period of its production and a simultaneous change in its function: while it may originally have been conceived as a collection of secular works to be treasured and added to as a kind of public entertainment, it eventually came to be thought of as a place for insignificant personal jottings which were not necessarily meant to be shared” in “Female Authors, Provincial Settings,” 283.

witnessing a “random” logic of inclusion, resonate with the imagined readerly interests of the historical audience of the Findern manuscript, such as representations of the female voice and body, and speaks to current conversations in medieval studies among its contemporary readers.

When read in the context of the manuscript’s original production and probable authorship and in relation to the proximate texts included in the manuscript’s pages, as other scholars have recently noted, a number of Findern’s texts reveal a focused attention to female protagonists and women’s agency and voices. In a recent article, Kara Doyle argues that manuscript evidence points to a “female interpretive community,” which collected texts representing skeptical, smart and strong women; ultimately, for Doyle, this curatorial logic explains why the *Thisbe* excerpt, of all the more ironic exemplars in Chaucer’s *Legend of Good Women* would have been selected for inclusion in the Findern Manuscript, as well as how it might have been interpreted in context: *Thisbe* appears as a representation of an active, equal participant in her love affair with Pyramus.<sup>201</sup> In his reading of several texts from the Findern Anthology, Kinch finds

two major kinds of interventions in textual transmission where female reading interests rise to the structure of content of the manuscript itself: (1) transmitting the text in partial, or adapted ways by leaving out material or rearranging material from an exemplar (where an exemplar can be identified or induced); (2) arranging sequences of texts excerpted from various sources that mutually illuminate one another through a theme

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<sup>201</sup> Kara A. Doyle, “*Thisbe Out of Context: Chaucer’s Female Readers and The Findern Manuscript*,” *The Chaucer Review* 40.3 (2006): 231-261. See also Carol Meale and Julia Boffey, “Gentlewomen’s Reading,” in *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*, ed. Lotte Hellinga, J.B. Trapp. (Cambridge, 1999), 526-540; Nicola F. McDonald, “Chaucer’s *Legend of Good Women*, Ladies at Court and the Female Reader,” *The Chaucer Review* 35.1 (2000): 22-42.

related to female experience.<sup>202</sup>

He adds to this list another intervention, namely, “writing original poems that respond to thematic concerns in the manuscript,” and he contends that all of these criteria are satisfied by the Findern Manuscript, the texts of which “reflect a consistent interest in, and concern with, female lament and agency.”<sup>203</sup> Additionally, Rosemary J. Appleton finds in her study a “complex network of textual relationships within C.U.L. MS Ff.1.6, many of which foreground the female voice and explore its role.”<sup>204</sup> While these and other scholars have convincingly argued that there is an organizational logic, at times even a “feminist” curation of texts, at work in Cambridge University MS Ff.1.6, I am interested in how this feminine-focused book, specifically, anthologizes complaints in the female voice: entreaties to lovers, dirges against fortune, and supplications to princes. Based on the investigation of the manuscript’s quiring and watermarks, Kate Harris posits that this “feminist” sequence was “early in association” with items XIII-XIX, which immediately precedes it, the group of texts including Chaucer’s “Complaint to His Purse.”<sup>205</sup> In what follows, I will argue that attention to this final Chaucerian complaint poem in the quire preceding the “feminist sequence” in the Findern manuscript has

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<sup>202</sup> Kinch, “‘To thenke what was in hir wille’: A Female Reading Context for the Findern Anthology,” 733.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid., 733.

<sup>204</sup> Rosemary J. Appleton, “Gender and Manuscript Studies,” *Medieval Feminist Newsletter* 26 (1998): 12-17.

<sup>205</sup> For a detailed investigation of the quiring and watermarks of the Findern Manuscript see Harris, “The Origins and Make-up of Cambridge University Library MS Ff.1.6,” especially 315.

significant implications for a gendered reading of Chaucer's "Complaint to His Purse" in his canon.

### **Chaucerian Irony and Gender: Connotations of "hevy" and "purs"**

"The Complaint of Chaucer to his Purse" is a "begging poem" of 21 lines in 3 stanzas, written in the Chaucerian rhyme royal, a seven-line stanza rhyming ABABBCC. The main body of the complaint is followed by a five line "envoy" rhyming DDEED, in half of the extant copies found in manuscript form and one of Caxton's prints.<sup>206</sup> In the first two lines of the poem, "To yow, my purse, and to noon other wight / Complayne I, for ye be my lady dere," Chaucer identifies the genre of the lines that follow, but also parodically transforms the traditional object of the complaint from a beloved, or Fortune, or the King (with arguably increasingly serious contexts dependent on the addressee) to his "purse."<sup>207</sup> This address to his coin container self-consciously mocks the speaker for what is a conventional vice – avarice – associated with old age, or when interpreted metaphorically, the slack purse indicates perhaps the concomitant sexual characteristic of old age – impotence.<sup>208</sup>

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<sup>206</sup> See Pace, "The Text of Chaucer's 'Purse'" and R.F. Yeager, "Chaucer's 'To His Purse': Begging, or Begging Off?" *Viator* 36 (2005): 391-414.

<sup>207</sup> See W.A. Davenport, *Chaucer: Complaint and Narrative* (Wolfeboro, 1988) for an overview of the form, content and rhetorical situation of Chaucerian complaint poems, a lyric and narrative genre that reappears throughout Chaucer's canon.

<sup>208</sup> However, in "Dating Chaucer," *The Chaucer Review* 42.1 (2007): 1-22, Kathryn Lynch warns against taking any self-referential authorial commentary too seriously. She writes, "the poet's expressions of insecurity or his references to age are typically construed literally, even by readers elsewhere more sophisticated in their handling of evidence," a point to which we will return below.

The speaker laments that his purse is “lyght” (3), establishing the binary between the undesirable lightness and the “hevy chere” that he desires.<sup>209</sup> Directly addressing the purse in the refrain that is repeated thrice in the poem, the speaker cries, “Beth hevy ageyn, or elles mot I dye.” The resounding conventionality of this complaint is seen in this self-aggrandizing claim that the speaker will die unless the addressee grants his petition. Of course, the humor in asking an inanimate object to respond to one’s desire is readily apparent, but Chaucer continues this conceit throughout the poem. He imagines “That I of yow the blisful soun may here” – the clanking jingle of coins in a moneybag – “Or see your colour lyk the sonne bright” – again, the metallic glimmer of a sack full of money.<sup>210</sup> Finally, the speaker prays for mercy “Syn that ye wole nat ben my tresorere,” using the financial language indicative of the state’s keeper of coins, but with the secondary meaning of being one’s keeper in the sense of protector. Apparently then, Chaucer’s speaker betrays himself as a vulnerable petitioner here, whose financial and perhaps physical fate lies in his purse.

The “Lenvoy de Chaucer” changes the addressee of the complaint from the inanimate (and thus, humorous) purse to the historical “conquerour of Brutes Albyon... verray kyng,” who might actually “alle oure harmes amende.” In *Hochon’s Arrow*

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<sup>209</sup> In an ironic turn here “hevynesse” is the desired state of the complainant, as opposed to the state of loss and injury the term implies in other Chaucerian complaints such as the the “Complaint of Venus,” in which he writes, “Ther nys so high comfort to my pleasaunce, / When that I am in any hevynesse” (1-2).

<sup>210</sup> Of course, as Yeager reminds us, “the ‘blisful soun’ (9) and ‘yelownesse’ (11) of a full purse are allusive: they recollect a literary damsel’s singing, and her traditional hue of hair” in “Chaucer’s ‘To His Purse’: Begging, or Begging Off?,” 384.

(1992), Paul Strohm revitalized attention to this poem during the New Historicist interest in London politics by arguing that the envoy participated in the Lancastrian propaganda machine and worked to legitimate Henry IV's ascension to the throne "by lyne and free eleccion."<sup>211</sup> But scholars have disagreed in recent years on this point. R. F. Yeager contested Strohm's claims, presenting evidence of suits, debts, and payments from *Chaucer's Life Records* in order to show the financial necessity that may have provoked the composition of this poem, as well as generous response(s) from King Richard during the 1380s, events which Yeager contends, "leave[] open the possibility that the ballade was written for Richard, and the envoy later for Henry."<sup>212</sup> Yeager points, too, to the relatively meager effort of Chaucer's lines in the face of John Gower and Christine de Pizan's effusive works of praise for Henry IV. One of the most explicit although possibly erroneous pieces of evidence is the notation in BL MS Harley 7333, in which John Shirley describes the envoy as "A supplicacion to Kyng Richard by Chaucier." It is reassuring that even in the age of Chaucer there was some confusion about the relationship between the ballad and the envoy, and between the composite poem and any political realities.

Although there is some critical disagreement about whether or not Chaucer's recorded debts during the last years of his life were representative of financial destitution,

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<sup>211</sup> See *Hochon's Arrow*. Kathryn Lynch concurs in *Dating Chaucer*, writing the consensus of a majority of Chaucerian scholars, namely, that "the Complaint of Chaucer to His Purse" is "generally identified as [Chaucer's] last poem" and that certainly "the envoy to the 'Complaint of Chaucer to His Purse' must have followed the accession of Henry IV to the throne of England in 1399" (1-2).

<sup>212</sup> Yeager, "Chaucer's 'To His Purse'," 287.

as well as whether or not the tumultuous transmission of power from Chaucer's former patron King Richard II to King Henry IV left him in the position of pleading with the new king for favor, there is some consensus that "The Complaint of Chaucer to his Purse" is a political "begging" poem, either sincere or parodic.<sup>213</sup> Strohm offers a historical and literal correlation between Chaucer's petition poem, records of his financial debt, and the "causae" of Henry IV's justification to the throne, but doesn't linger long on the possibility of a reading based on the "unassimilated pockets of potential resistance" that remained in Lancastrian England.<sup>214</sup> Yeager insists that Henry IV had more to gain from Chaucer's endorsement while the poet certainly had more to lose.<sup>215</sup> Yeager argues that Chaucer writes the envoy under duress and that the last two lines of the envoy are pleading to God, ironically and behind Henry's back. Depending on when the poem was composed, Lindeboom claims, he could have been begging for Richard's life.<sup>216</sup> Attending to just the words on the page, then, leaves a reader with several unanswered questions about one of Chaucer's most apparently straightforward poems.

It could, of course, be a straightforward petition poem, but – and even taking away the question of political alliances for a moment – the Chaucer many of us have

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<sup>213</sup> Plummer's study of conventional lyrical language however, reminds us that the lyric envoys, while "pointing outward from the world of the lyric to the world of objective reality" are "at the same time reaffirming through their verbal conventionality that they are a part of the fictive world of the love song" in "The Poetic Function of Conventional Language in the Middle English Lyric," *Studies in Philology* 72.4 (October 1975): 367-385 at 384.

<sup>214</sup> *Hochon's Arrow*, 91.

<sup>215</sup> Yeager, "Chaucer's 'To His Purse': Begging, or Begging Off?"

<sup>216</sup> Lindeboom, "Chaucer's Complaint to His Purse: Sounding a Subversive Note?"

come to know was more interested in play, irony, subtlety, and wry humor than pandering to patrons. In fact, of course, we have no official records of Chaucer ever having been compensated for his poetry during his lifetime. Let us look at what the speaker says in Chaucer's "Complaint to His Purse." The first two lines signal an ironic twist, and a multiplicity of meaning, in the lines: "to yow, my purse, and to noon other wight compleyne I." Chaucer draws on the long tradition of complaint poetry, as I mentioned, one predicated on representing grievances about Fortune (ie. Chaucer's Boethian complaints), lamenting mortality and/or impending death (recall Virginia in *The Physician's Tale*), or bewailing the travails of courtly love (ie. Anelida's complaint in *Anelida and Arcite*). The thrust of these traditions stands in stark contrast to the addressee of the poem – the purse – a move which signals we are in the genealogical realm of the more parodic complaint about the times (ie. MS Harley 2253's "Order de bel ayse," in which the poet criticizes the vices of avarice and lust, while obscenely representing sexual acts and the body.) That word – "purse" – throws a wrench in the system right from the start.

With the obscene connotations of the word "purse" in Chaucer's lexicon, he signals that we are on the latter path. The first possible gendered reading of the poem revolves around an anatomical definition of the word "purs" provided by the *Middle English Dictionary*, ie. the scrotum. Chaucer employed this meaning of the word elsewhere in his canon, as in the case of the Wife of Bath, who refers to her five husbands in the combined language of finances and anatomy: "I haue wedded fyue, / Of whiche I haue pyked out the beste, / Bothe of here nether purs and of here cheste." In this context,



Chaucer's complaint about an undesirable state of his nether region and desire for restitution can be read along the lines of some of his other self-critical language about his old age, failing body, and lack of skill with the ladies.<sup>217</sup>

In addition to the reference to male genitalia associated with the word "purs," the poem also plays on the meaning of the term "hevy" as a reference to pregnancy.<sup>218</sup> In particular, the second stanza teems with playful *entendre* suggesting sexuality and pregnancy. In a stanza that illustrates solar imagery, referencing the "colour lyk the sonne briyght" of the speaker's desired monies, and which playfully doubles the meaning of the heavy/light dichotomy to indicate light and dark as well, the reference to the night, however, suggests another reading of the line about getting a "blissful soun" "of yow." According to the Middle English Dictionary, "soun" refers to the sound made by (the jangling coins in) a purse, but Chaucer clearly exploits the homophonic qualities of the words "soun," "sonne" and "sone," or sound/sun/son, to amplify the possible interpretations of these lines. A "hevy" purse is something that you can hear the "soun" and see the "colour" of, and so is a woman "heavy" with child. In fact, the Trotula gynecological text provides some context for the obstetrical network of this language.<sup>219</sup> In a section "De signis inpregnationis" (On the Signs of Pregnancy), we hear of methods

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<sup>217</sup> See Burrow's discussion of Chaucer's "Envoy to Scogan," in which he discusses Chaucer's language about his figure and his "rusty sheath," which Burrows interprets as self-critical statements about the bodily manifestations of his old age in "Chaucer as Petitioner: Three Poems," *The Chaucer Review* 45.3 (2011): 349-356.

<sup>218</sup> See the Oxford English Dictionary, which records the meaning of "great with young; gravid, pregnant" dating back to Chaucer's lifetime.

<sup>219</sup> See Monica Green, *The Trotula: A Medieval Compendium of Women's Medicine*.

to discern whether or not a woman is pregnant and whether she is carrying a female or male child. The section records a quotation from Hippocrates: “mulier que masculum gerit bene colorata est et dextram mammillam habet grossiorem. Si pallida est, feminam gerit, et sinistram mamillam habet grossiorem” [a woman who is carrying a male is well-colored and her right breast is bigger. If she is pale, she is carrying a female, and the left breast is bigger] (105). The language of the “hevy chere,” combined with reference to “your colour lyke the sonne bryght” resonates in the context of medieval obstetrical medicine and might be apparent to an attentive reader.<sup>220</sup>

A secondary meaning of the term “lyght,” ass opposed to the heaviness of pregnancy, names the state of a female having been delivered of a child.<sup>221</sup> Therefore, it is possible to read in the lines “I am so sory, now that ye been lyght; / For certes but yf ye make me hevy chere...” a woman’s lament after having delivered a child for another pregnancy. In this network of significance, the conventional claim by the speaker that he might die becomes a real, practical, and impending concern. The death drive and/or the actual threat of death echoes in the refrain of “elles moot I dye” as well as being reiterated in the language of the first and last stanzas. The speaker cries for “mercy” or else he “were as leef be layd upon my bere” (5), and he ends the poem by appealing to his petitioner who “mowen alle oure harmes amende” (25).

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<sup>220</sup> In a later section on the criteria for selecting a wet nurse, the desirable “red” and “white” complexion is described, as well as the suggestion that the lady be “a little fat.” This attention to “colour” in the context of the complaint genre also resonates with the convention of the blazon and the reader’s expectation of praising a lady’s complexion.

<sup>221</sup> See the *Middle English Dictionary* (using the search term l?ght).

This pregnant diction resonates with that of other Chaucerian envoys. John Burrow has investigated the role of Chaucer as petitioner in his begging poems, but, most significant for my argument, he finds that the complaint always begins with a place of “supplicacion,” a “wrong or lack” that needs to be redressed.<sup>222</sup> In the case of “LEnvoy de Chaucer a Scogan,” Burrow describes the lack as explicitly physical and phallic, a body “whose ‘figure’ or waistline would disqualify him from serving as a target for Cupid’s fiery arrows,” for as Chaucer writes, “all hem that ben hoor and rounde of shap... than shal we for oure labour have no mede” (31-33).<sup>223</sup> Burrow suggests that the speaker’s ‘labour’ in this case is artistic and courtly, but it of course connotes sexuality, pregnancy and labor as well, and inversely, old age, impotence or sterility. Indeed, in an abrupt change of metaphor, Chaucer’s muse is a phallic, militaristic sword “that rusteth in my shethe stille in pees” (39). As usual Chaucer’s mastery of multiple and often sexual connotations is at work in Chaucer’s “Complaint to His Purse.” Therefore, attention to a gendered reading of, specifically, the words “hevy” and “purs” reveals that the thematic concerns of the Findern Manuscript, and in particular, of the Chaucerian and “feminist” sequence of texts – its representations of women’s voices and emphasis on women’s bodily and sexual experiences -- are anticipated by “The Complaint of Chaucer to his Purse.”

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<sup>222</sup> Burrow, “Chaucer as Petitioner: Three Poems,” 349

<sup>223</sup> Ibid., 353.

## Discourses of Affinity: the Meaning Matrix of Women's Books

The Troilus frontispiece, as it is known to scholars, illustrates the quintessential situation imagined of a lay medieval reading community, in which texts are read aloud to a mixed audience of men and women.<sup>224</sup> While the frontispiece is a self-conscious representation of authorship in a more polished and professional book than the Findern manuscript, it is perhaps the best illustration of the fact that, as Scase writes, “medieval reading was... always a communal activity.”<sup>225</sup> And while one can imagine a “socially diverse” reading community of men and women, religious adherents and layfolk for any medieval domestic manuscript, as opposed to those books produced in other contexts such as in the university, monasteries, and at court. Scase calls for scholars to “triangulate [literary and visual evidence within texts] with... careful scrutiny of the material books” (561) themselves when making any claims about readership.<sup>226</sup> And as Trigg reminds us in *Rewriting Chaucer*: “The Chaucerian ‘community’ is always divided, and never as universal or inclusive as the discourses of affinity imply.”<sup>227</sup> Therefore, when making any claims about the heterogeneous readership and the varied

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<sup>224</sup> For a complete discussion of the Troilus frontispiece and the implied audience of Chaucer's works, see Derek Pearsall, “The Troilus Frontispiece and Chaucer's Audience,” *The Yearbook of English Studies* 7 (1977): 68-74. See also Scase, “Reading Communities,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Medieval Literature in English*, ed. Elaine M. Treharne and Greg Walker (Oxford, 2010), 557-73, in which she posits that low levels of literacy as well as the cost of book production influenced the cultural preference for “communal reading” during the later middle ages.

<sup>225</sup> Scase, “Reading Communities,” 557.

<sup>226</sup> Scase, “Reading Communities,” 561.

<sup>227</sup> Trigg, “Discourses of Affinity in the Reading Communities of Geoffrey Chaucer,” in *Rewriting Chaucer: Culture, Authority, and the Idea of the Authentic Text, 1400-1602*, ed. Thomas A. Prendergast and Barbara Kline (Columbus, 1999), 270-91 at 289.

interpretations of any particular text in the Findern manuscript, including the Chaucerian and feminist sequences and the multi-faceted “Purse,” one must attend to imagined readers’ holistic experience within this book, as well as other ones like it, which might be encountered in a similar domestic context.

Significantly, the Findern manuscript contains on ff. 29r-42v a copy of “The Parliament of Love,” in which the speaker addresses a fictional<sup>228</sup> audience:

ladyes of every londe,  
Both mayde, and wife that had housbonde,  
Wythe gentyll wymmen of lower degree,  
and marchauntz wyfes grete plente” (l. 5-8)<sup>229</sup>

While it is interesting that one of the texts included in the Findern manuscript represents a mixed audience of women from different lands, sexual statuses and classes, for the purposes of this chapter, we are most concerned with the Findern manuscript’s implied reader, the “ideal reader,” or as Strohm puts it, “the person the reader becomes when he or she follows all the directions in the text” (140). Strohm argues that it is possible to “build from the text itself a rough sketch of the literary knowledge and attitudes of the audience it is addressing” (141).<sup>230</sup> Based on the evidence of the presence of lyrics

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<sup>228</sup> We should distinguish, in line with Strohm’s taxonomy, between Chaucer’s “fictional, implied, intended [and] actual” audiences. See Paul Strohm, “Chaucer’s Audience(s): Fictional, Implied, Intended, Actual,” *The Chaucer Review* 18.2 (1983): 137-145.

<sup>229</sup> See Frederick J. Furnivall, ed. “Political, Religious, and Love Poems. *Early English Text Society. Original Series*, 15. (London, 1866), 48-51.

<sup>230</sup> For my purposes, I am less concerned with the “intended audience” of the manuscript, a group of folks who might include, for example, Richard II (to whom Gower’s *Confessio Amantis* was dedicated), or Henry IV (to whom Chaucer addresses the “Complaint to His Purse). Additionally, I’ll leave the

written in the female voice, the possible self-identification<sup>231</sup> with female protagonists in a variety of texts selected for the collection, the inclusion of genres associated with female readership (ie. romance), the five women's names recorded in the margins of the manuscript, and finally the historical evidence of Derbyshire gentry household women readers,<sup>232</sup> it is clear that a female literary community of writers and readers is implied by the organizational logic of the Findern Manuscript, a meaning matrix which should influence our interpretation of all the texts selected for inclusion.<sup>233</sup>

According to a lateral philology, readership and interpretive patterns connect the Findern manuscript to other domestic literary anthologies, as well as to other women's books, which bears rehearsing here in our attempts to understand Chaucer's "Complaint to His Purse" in its Findern manuscript context. We should ask, in other words, what other books and types of texts might a 15<sup>th</sup>-century domestic Derbyshire gentry audience have access to and experience reading? Another way to conceptualize this lateral move is by imagining what other collections, genres, and interpretive heuristics might prime an

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historical work of uncovering the earliest "actual audience" of gentry household members in Derbyshire to other scholars.

<sup>231</sup> See Ashby Kinch, "'To thenke what was in hir wille': A Female Reading Context for the Findern Anthology," *Neophilologus* 91 (2007): 729-744 at 742 for an argument about the "circular self-identification" of female-voiced complaints and women readers.

<sup>232</sup> See Nicola F. McDonald, "Chaucer's Legend of Good Women, Ladies at Court and the Female Reader," *The Chaucer Review* 35.1 (2000): 22-42 for a discussion of lay women readers of Chaucer's texts.

<sup>233</sup> For a discussion of Chaucer's female readers, see Richard Firth Green, "Women in Chaucer's Audience," *The Chaucer Review* 18.2 (Fall 1983): 146-154.

audience to encounter a particular text with all the ensuing readerly baggage – of expectations, connections, and lingering significations?

While household books regularly contain more practical manuals, advice literature, recipes, agronomies, as well as Latin sacred literature like prayers and devotional poems, the Findern manuscript privileges secular, literary, vernacular verse. This selection of poetry is a self-conscious literary collection, one whose intended audience is familiar with a number of genres, (including romance and complaint) and fluent in a number of discourses, (including those of courtly love, patronage, and politics). The Findern manuscript, in fact, bears similarities to other domestic manuscript collections also significant to understanding its social and literary milieu. According to Kate Harris, who comprehensively summarizes the relationship between texts included in Cambridge University F.f.1.6 and other domestic manuscript collections, the Findern anthology shares many items with a group of manuscripts originally coined the “Oxford Group” by Eleanor Prescott Hammond including a copy of “To His Purse.”<sup>234</sup> According to Nichols and Wenzel, the Oxford group are:

vernacular poetic manuscripts that reflect a primary interest in Chaucer’s dream visions and lyrics and that derive from commercial London bookshops. These three manuscripts all include the Legend and the Parliament, as well as Lydgate’s Complaint of the Black Knight, Clanvowe’s Boke of Cupide, and Hoccleve’s Letter of Cupid... [as well as] The Complaint of Mars and The Complaint of Venus, which appear in the Fairfax and Tanner manuscripts. (56)

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<sup>234</sup> See Harris, “The Origins and Make-up of Cambridge University Library MS Ff.1.6,” 309, where she lists the manuscripts related textually and genealogically to those included in the Findern Anthology. These other collections are: Bodley 638, Fairfax 16, Tanner 346, Longleat 258, Digby 181, Trinity R.3.19, and Thynne’s printed edition *The Workes of Geffray Chaucer* 1532.

In fact, the Findern Anthology reproduces three texts – Chaucer’s “On the Death of Pity,” “A Lover’s Plaint,” and “To His Mistress” – in the exact order as Tanner 346. According to George Pace’s critical paleographical work with the 10 extant copies of Chaucer’s “Complaint to His Purse,” he finds that the Findern Manuscript’s copy of this item must have derived from the same exemplar as that included in MS Fairfax 16, one of the Oxford group of manuscripts related to Tanner. The excerpt from Chaucer’s *Legend of Good Women* included in the Findern anthology appears also in Pepys 2006, Rawlinson C86 and Additional 28617.<sup>235</sup> Finally, Pepys 2006 shares a copy of Chaucer’s “Complaint of Venus” with The Findern Manuscript, as well as with Arch. Selden B 24 and Notary’s edition (1500? STC 5089).<sup>236</sup> In aggregate, these various connections to the network of contemporary domestic manuscripts, as Harris suggests, mean that

the compilers of FF.1.6 were not so far ‘outside the charmed circle’ that they could not gain access to exemplars containing ‘good’ texts of the poems they wished to copy. They had access to texts editors now designate as ‘best’ and choose accordingly as the bases of their editions.<sup>237</sup>

The Findern manuscript, then, seems to be one in a large network of domestic literary collections, marking its place in a history of households that participated in transmitting vernacular culture outside of the main literary and political center in London and at court.

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<sup>235</sup> See Robinson, *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., 912.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid., 919.

<sup>237</sup> Harris, “The Origins and Make-up of Cambridge University Library MS Ff.1.6,” 312. This speaks to the discussion in the field of medieval studies about cosmopolitan versus provincial literary culture, and relates, I think, to the work I will do in Chapter 3 with the East Anglian manuscript containing the Digby *Play of Mary Magdalene*.



Significantly, however, the Findern manuscript is not a bookshop production, but a provincial one, more akin to MS Harley 2253, as well as other domestic women's books. The Findern anthology differs from other domestic collections in that it is not a religious, nor primarily a didactic collection unlike a significant number of other domestic and women's books. Most legal evidence in wills of the transfer of books between women records books of hours or prayer books.<sup>238</sup> There are, of course, a number of extant courtesy manuals or other examples of advice literature intended for a female audience as well. These manuals, in fact, at times address explicitly the question of what reading materials are appropriate for "gentlewomen," which don't always align with the types of texts included in the Findern manuscript.

The genre most often associated with a female readership – romance – is also the genre most often advised against reading. The Findern anthology does contain a complete romance, Sir Degrevant, but as Laura Olsen writes,

The Findern Collection... is an entirely different kind of romance manuscript. Among its many English texts we find only one whole romance... the tale of Sir Degrevant also included in Thornton's collection, which makes Findern unlike both Auchinleck and the Lincoln Thornton with their numerous romances. It is also unlike the London Thornton, the massive Vernon collection, and many other extant romance manuscripts that tend to combine only a few or even one romance with a number of pious works.<sup>239</sup>

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<sup>238</sup> See Charity Scott-Stokes, *Women's Books of Hours in Medieval England* (D.S. Brewer, 2006).

<sup>239</sup> Linda Olson, "Romancing the Book: Manuscripts for 'Everich Englische'," *Opening up Medieval Manuscripts: Literary and Visual Approaches* (Cornell University Press, 2012), 139.

Instead of a romance collection, Olson finds in the folios of the manuscript “a Derbyshire gentry community of men and especially women who appear to have conspired to compile a remarkable “love anthology.”<sup>240</sup>

I would more aptly term the Findern Manuscript a vernacular literary anthology, not of “love,” but of women – about, for and (at times) by them. As other scholars have noted, “what so men seyn” is one of the more convincing indications of a woman’s perspective in the Findern anthology. The speaker begins the poem by contrasting her perspective with the masculine gaze of the courtly lover. She exclaims, “What so men seyn / love is no peyn / to them, serteyn, / butt varians.”<sup>241</sup> Throughout the poem, the speaker refers to men, “ther hertis”, “ther mowthis”, “ther othis”, and even “ther lyuys” using third-person pronouns. She exhibits a playful awareness of men’s “downbilnys” amid a long tradition of male lovers lamenting their love-sickness before marriage and then complaining about their wives after marriage, “for they constreyn... ther mowthis to pleyn / ther displeauns.” In a moment of poetic doubleness herself, the speaker describes men’s false prayers as simply means to catch “their” prey:

For when they pray,  
Ye shall have nay;  
What so they sey  
Beware ffor shame.

Ffor every daye  
They wante ther pray  
Wher-so they may,  
And make butt game.

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<sup>240</sup> Olson, “Romancing the Book,” 139.

<sup>241</sup> Robbins, “The Findern Anthology,” 632-633.

Whether performed or authentic, aligned with a historical female body voicing these perspectives or not, the poetic speaker in “What so men seyn” appeals to an implied reader sympathetic to the feminine perspective in the courtly love dyad. In fact, the speaker makes the reader complicit in beguiling those fickle, unpleasant, insincere men.

She concludes the poem:

Then semyth *me*  
ye may well see  
they be so fre  
          in euyry plase,  
  
hit were pete  
butt they shold be  
be-gelid, parde,  
          with-owtyn grase. [italics added]

In this playful re-working and alternative articulation of courtly love ideals from a feminine perspective – and especially in this provincial context of the Findern manuscript – the speakers display their participation in the “art of courteous speech” but also an intimacy with the “real life” of Derbyshire women.<sup>242</sup>

For, as Olson argues, “What so men seyn... addresses some very real social and emotional issues and offers practical advice as well, particularly for young women who might wish to combine social pleasures while maintaining personal honor and safety, not only from heartbreak, but from infamy and pregnancy as well – advice, that is, on how to play the courtly love game successfully themselves” (147). The stakes of this gendered

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<sup>242</sup> See John Stevens, *Music and Poetry in the Early Tudor Court*, (Cambridge, 1961). See especially ch. 10, “The Courtly Makers from Chaucer to Wyatt,” in which Stevens suggests that provincial poets “have learnt the idiom of the language of love but somehow seem to be missing the meaning” (224).

game -- this sexual soiree -- described in “What so men seyn” is made explicitly physical in the Paston letters when we hear Edmond Paston II report that “my syster ys delyuerd, and the child passyd to God, who send vus hys grace.”<sup>243</sup> The game that men and women play with words and with their bodies in real life has real consequences: a fact with which the implied readership of these lines in the Findern manuscript would be very familiar.

Margery Paston writes to her husband in 1477 about precisely some of these women’s issues as she experienced them as a member of the provincial gentry society in 15<sup>th</sup>-century England. She writes letters to her husband in the language of courtly love and complaint, repeatedly emphasizing her bodily vulnerability, pain and desire. We hear her expression of individuality and femininity as an explicitly linguistic and bodily one, both courtly and private in nature. She writes, “and yf it please yowe to here of my welefare, I am not in good heele of body ner of herte, nor schall be tyll I here from yowe,” and she includes the following verse in the epistle as well: “For ther wottys no creature what peyn that I endure, / And for to be deede I dare it not dyscure” (p. 662). Margery Paston writes with the idioms of courtly love, lamenting that “myn herte” is “full of hevynesse” (p. 663), but in one particular letter we find, according to Davis, an “unskilled” hand, perhaps Margery’s own, scribbling out a postscript: “Ser, I prey you if ye tary longe at London that it wil plese [you] to sende for me, for I thynke longe sen I lay in your armes” (665). The performed intimacy and the emphasis on her bodily desires and potential demise in this postscript is striking though conventional, and I think

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<sup>243</sup> See Norman Davis, ed., *Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century*. Part 1. (New York, 2004), 639.

it is a powerful example of the discourse about women's perspectives, their bodies, and the precarious positionality of each in the languages of domestic manuscripts, women's genres, and indeed, in the lives of medieval women.

While the epistolary genre naturally lends itself to thematics about a lover's absence, we see echoes of this courtly language in a number of the unique lyrics found in the Findern manuscript. For example, in item XXIII on f. 69v, which follows "Purse" in the same hand, the speaker complains, "My l hert this clad in payn / Wote natt welle what do nor seyn -- / longe absens greuyth me so" (1-3). And while the trope of distant lovers has a very long tradition in courtly love poetry, the speaker of "my woofull hert" yearns for "sight of hym agayn / that cawsis my woo" (11-12), a masculine pronoun that indicates either a homoerotic male speaker, or perhaps more likely, a female speaker's voice, like the one we hear in the Paston letters. Olson suggests a type of authentic correlation, in fact, between the unique lyrics found in Findern and the lived experience of medieval women:

Some [lyrics] express the female condition with a sensitive accuracy, replacing the sexual and social powers of the unattainable lady worshipped and resented in the work of courtly male poets for what seem more genuine descriptions of lonely, virtually powerless women with little more than their steadfast affection and obedience to their marriage vows as consolation. Such scenarios match well the historical reality of gentry women, who were among the most stationary of well-to-do individuals in the late Middle Ages.<sup>244</sup>

In fact, multiple lyrics contained in the Findern manuscript echo this stationary subject position. The speaker in item XXXI on ff. 135r-136r claims that "ffor the while ye were

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<sup>244</sup> Olson, "Romancing the Book," 149.

away, / Myn hert seyde nought but walaway" (3-4). She entreats her lover to "come home, dere hert, from tarieng" (14), or at least to send "sume tiding" (22) to ease her "hevinesse" (38). Item XXXVII on f. 138v expresses "grete greuaunce / ffor your partyng" (5-6), and the speaker in item LII on ff. 153v-154r cries, "syn that ye moste nedys departe me fro, it ys to me a very dedly woo" (20-21). Item LIII on f. 154r also describes a scene in which her lover leaves and she promises to continue serving him truly "where-euer ye goo" (12). The speaker in "My wooful heart" bewails her plight in life as a stationary wife committed to an absent husband, to whom she complains.

In this women's literary anthology, the Findern readers encounter discourses of affinity that reverberate with the thematics of other domestic literature, and resound in the texts shared with other literary anthologies. As the evidence of the women's signatures, "feminist" excerpts and unique female-voiced lyrics suggests, women readers were an intended, if not actual, historical component of the Findern manuscript's medieval audience, and echoes of their lived experience and reading history would necessarily inform the interpretation of any particular text encountered in the medieval domestic context.

Chaucer's "Purse," while certainly a courtly and political, parodic and flippant piece, also appeals to the sacred tone of prayer, especially in the envoy:

O conquerour of Brutes Albyoun  
Which that by line and free eleccioun  
Been verray king, this song to yow I sende,  
And ye that mowen alle our harmes amende  
Have mind upon my supplicacioun.

The poem transitions from a courtly parody to a heightened quasi-epic, quasi-religious register, reminiscent of ancient invocations to the gods, or of prayers found in women's books of hours. In an Anglo-Norman prayer for a safe childbirth contained in the DuBois hours, which was owned by a female book owner, the devotee prays to "Lord God, Almighty King," clearly a sacred analogue to the practical historical reference, the "verray king," Richard or Henry, depending on the weight we place on Chaucer's Lancastrian connections as well as on the timing/dating of Chaucer's "Purse."<sup>245</sup> While Chaucer's speaker begs for mercy from his lady "ells mote I dye" – a common courtly trope – the suppliant speaker of the prayer is literally physically vulnerable, during the terrifying, traumatic experience of childbirth, writing, "I am in danger of death,/ woeful and comfortless,/ if I do not have your help."<sup>246</sup> She prays to Christ, "the sovereign almighty king... that he will preserve me from harm."<sup>247</sup> The prayer in the Book of Hours employs similar language about the threat of death, "harm" and "Harmes," and especially the vulnerability of the pregnant female body and her child.

What is interesting about these discourses – the sacred prayer in the Book of Hours, the epistolary entreaties by a wife to her absent husband, and the lyrical complaints of the Findern manuscript – is the positionality of the speaker. The supplicants' female gender aligns with their subject position relative to the "sovereign" – a conflation of God in the prayer from the Dubois Book of Hours, the patriarchal head of

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<sup>245</sup> Charity Scott-Stokes, *Women's Books of Hours in Medieval England*, 152.

<sup>246</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

household in Findern Unique lyrics item XXXI, and the “conqueror” and King of England in the case of Chaucer’s “Purse.” Another significant correspondence between these discourses of affinity is their preoccupation with women’s experiences of pregnancy. In the Paston letters, the wife describes herself as her husband’s “bedwoman” and employs metaphors of “labure” to describe how her “hevinesse” “growe[s] to effect.” Edmond Paston II writes of the literal childbirth of his sister, relating the actual vulnerability of the female body and the real risks of pregnancy to an expectant mother and her child: “My syster is deyvered, and the child passed to God, who send us his grace.” So when we encounter the language in Chaucer’s “Purse” of “hevinesse”, we recall not just its courtly connotations of sorrow and woe, but also its connotations of pregnancy; when we encounter a female-gendered “purse” in Chaucer’s complaint poem, we recall the genital innuendo in other texts in Chaucer’s canon; when we read of the speaker’s “harmes,” we think not only of emotional distresses but of the physical danger women endure in their lived experiences; when we read about the “lyne” of England’s “king” and “conqueror,” we hear too the subservient subject position of women in their husband’s homes, where they are responsible for contributing to his patrilineal heritage.

In the literal voices of medieval women readers – wives and daughters, virgins and widows, as well as their male family and household members – and/or in the same hand that inscribed “My woofull hert”, the gender-bending echoes between the Chaucerian (presumably masculine) speaker and the proximate female-voiced complaints are unmistakable. In the matrix of manuscript, genre, audience, social milieu and literary vernacular culture, Chaucer’s “Complaint to His Purse” can be read as a woman’s



complaint to her “lady” – her “lyght” womb – lamenting that her “saveor” and “king” and conqueror, responsible for the “lyne” of her children’s paternity, is absent, as we hear so many of the Findern manuscript’s unique lyrics cry.

### **Feminist Complaint and Structures of Stasis: the Gendered Agency of Chaucer and his Female Readers**

By performing the roles of courtly lover, complainant, poet and subject in “To his Purse,” Chaucer aligns himself in many ways with the woman-on-bottom position in these power dynamics. Attending to the gendered work that the complaint genre, the courtly mode, and the address to the king is doing in Chaucer’s “Complaint to His Purse” is essential to interpreting the significance of this late poem in the author’s canon. But it is doubly significant when we place its production and reception in the original context of the Findern manuscript. It would be a mistake, Hansen writes, to divorce Chaucer “from a sense of gendered agency in the production and reception of literary texts. This agency can be conceived of as dispersed and fragmentary, sometimes authorial, sometimes scribal, sometimes critical, sometimes textual and discursive.”<sup>248</sup> In the case of the inclusion of Chaucer’s “Complaint to His Purse” in the 15<sup>th</sup>-century domestic Findern anthology, the “gendered agency” of this piece is certainly distributed among the various participants in its “manuscript matrix.” Chaucer’s verbal play with the gendered language of genitalia and pregnancy in the otherwise “straight” complaint poem is the first bit of evidence; then there’s the compiler’s organization and selection of materials in

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<sup>248</sup> Hansen, *Chaucer’s Fictions of Gender*, 25.

a “feminist sequence”; the original lyrics composed in a woman’s voice; the women’s names inscribed in the manuscript’s margins; the thematic connections and verbal resonances between texts included in the collection: these all point to a surprisingly fluid gendered agency at work in this “political”, “begging”, “occasional” poem between men.

In those moments of gender-bending effeminization and expressing a desire for fecundity, is it possible that Chaucer is actually commenting on the role of the pleading artist and political servant? In Elaine Tuttle Hansen’s *Chaucer’s Fictions of Gender* (1992), she argues that the medieval author is feminized, which aligns him with the positionality of the aristocratic woman: subordinated, still, pleading and dependent. Hansen defines “feminization” as “a dramatized state of social, psychological, and discursive crisis wherein men occupy positions and/or perform functions already occupied and performed, within a given text and its contexts, by women or normatively assigned by orthodox discourses to Woman” (16).

I would like to suggest, however, that the effect of Chaucer’s gendered agency in the copy of “Purse” contained in the Findern manuscript is that the potentially ineffective nature of his complaint is highlighted. In the Findern manuscript’s unique lyrics, the speakers consistently lament the futility of their complaints. On f. 138v in Item XXXVII, the speaker claims that she will not even attempt to complain or gain succor, for it is a vain attempt:

Though I ne playn  
My wofull payn  
But bere yt styll,  
It were in vayn  
To sey again

The female speaker of Item XXXI argues that she does not even have a direct object of her plaint, writing, “I not to whome I may complaine.” Clearly, then, Chaucer’s “Purse” differs from these selected female complaint verses in that the envoy seemingly articulates Chaucer’s direct appeal for relief from his sovereign king. However, the contradictory power of Chaucer’s purse, with all its attendant masculine, phallic, genital referents of the testicles and the connotations of sexual vigor contrasts with the equally significant feminine imagery associated with the purse as a vulnerable and empty receptacle (obviously, metaphorically representing the vagina) as well as the feminine, pleading, dependent subject position of the courtly speaker and poet. So while the inclusion of the envoy attached to Chaucer’s “Purse” in the Findern manuscript -- which doesn’t accompany every copy of the poem in manuscript – suggests a one-to-one correspondence between Chaucer’s begging poem and a real, historical patron who will satisfy the complaint, a type of call and response, the discourses of affinity informing our interpretation of Chaucer’s “Purse” in its manuscript context primes the reader to be more skeptical of the pragmatic effects of literary complaints. In fact, the discourses of courtly love, patronage and politics establish structures of stasis that subordinate lovers, poets, and subjects in a hierarchy that silences the feminine positions in each relationship. A type of resignation characterizes the voice of complaint in the Findern manuscript; the speaker of “my woofull herte” argues, “Then thogh I wold me ought complan / of my sorwe and grete payn, / who sholde comfort me do?” The manuscript’s “network of

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<sup>249</sup> Beadle and Owens, *The Findern Manuscript*.

“allusions”<sup>250</sup> instills in the reader a healthy skepticism about whether or not the speaker of Chaucer’s “Purse” will ever achieve that contradictorily desired “heaviness” or ever receive the satisfaction from his (or her) conqueror and king.

Ultimately, though, whether he was in desperate need or not, the King met Chaucer’s historical need for financial patronage, as Chaucer’s Life Records show. But the women in Derbyshire households in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries who might have had access to this manuscript and to the “feminist complaints” compiled in it did not likely have as direct access to their king, whether taken literally or figuratively. Even in their own households, husbands were often away for long periods of time, performing the lament was as important if not more than receiving succor. Read in the context of the Derbyshire household from which the manuscript originated, and considering the matrix of meaning generated by the vernacular culture of women readers at home, Chaucer’s “To His Purse” is much more than a poem of request for a particular payment by Henry IV in 1400, it is an outcry in a female voice, one ripe with imagery of fullness and procreation as well as references to the body, from a woman doomed, like Philomena, to sing her futile song, with neither God nor lover nor king to lighten the weight of lament.

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<sup>250</sup> Jill Mann, “The Authority of the Audience in Chaucer,” in *Poetics: Theory and Practice in Medieval English Literature*, eds. Piero Boitani and Anna Torti (Cambridge, 1990), 1-12.

### **Chapter Three**

#### **Staging Spiritual Ravishment: Women's Bodies in the Digby Mary Magdalene**

While this project began with an investigation of the literal “cun” of the fabliau genre and turned to the metaphorical “purse” of Chaucer’s complaint, each in the context of domestic manuscripts with arguably female audiences, this chapter addresses another medieval genre – the religious drama -- and a different reading context – or in this case, potentially a public performance context – of the Digby *Mary Magdalene* play. The through line between these chapters is the interest in representing female bodies and the positionality of women in a variety of generic and bibliographic contexts, and I have argued that a genital poetics critiques patriarchal power structures by illuminating the sexual dynamics of the domestic sphere, the potential of violence against the female body, and the imagination of a feminine agency. In “le chevalier qui fist les cuns parler,” all sexual poetics, euphemisms and innuendo are literalized in the speaking “cun,” a figure whose vulnerability and power highlight a critique of discourses of chivalry. In Chaucer’s “Complaint to His Purse,” I posited the interpretive stakes of a gendered reading of the “purse,” namely that the complaint is a meditation on the metaphoric feminine position of the medieval author and that when read in the context of the meaning matrix of women’s books, the begging poem exploits the thematics of bodily vulnerability, stillness, and pregnancy in order to represent the vulnerable, dependent,

disempowered and feminized position of Chaucer's speaker in relation to his powerful, masculine patron and king.

At first glance, the Digby *Mary Magdalene* is quite a different literary artifact. Its manuscript history and provenance are more obscure than those of MS Harley 2253 and the Findern manuscript. There is neither an "*ABC a femmes*" beginning this manuscript, nor are women's names inscribed in the margins. In fact, the best evidence for the provenance and transmission of the manuscript places it in a monastic context early in its production. MS Digby 133 is a collection of dramatic texts, including *The Conversion of St. Paul*, *The Killing of the Children*, and a fragment of the morality play *Wisdom*, in addition to *Mary Magdalene*. Clearly an anthology of medieval drama, MS Digby 133 is invested in performance of men and women's religiosity, representation of domestic scenes in public, as well as participates in the incarnational aesthetics of later medieval East Anglian culture. The texts contained in MS Digby 133 meditate on the embodied nature of religious experience. After all, Christ appeared on earth in a human body, and the Eucharist involves the transubstantiation of bread into the body of Christ.

The Digby *Mary Magdalene*'s detailed descriptions of her home life, her travels from the home, the private lives of kings and queens, and women's embodied experiences of pregnancy, fasting, and death locate this manuscript and its dramatic contents in the same line of inquiry as the other cases we've examined in this project. The *Mary Magdalene* play begins with the ranting tyrant topos, the powerful voice of the

“Inperator” commencing the drama.<sup>251</sup> Then follows the parallel speech by Syrus, Magdalene’s father, who divides his wealth and property (*a la Lear*) among his children. Magdalene is entrusted with the castle Magdalene, after which she is named. The overpowering masculine voices of Emperor Tiberius and Cyrus are juxtaposed to the obedient speech of “Mary Mau[dleyn]” whose first words are in praise of God’s “pes” and her father’s “giftes” (93-95). The play then follows Mary Magdalene across the play area and across the globe, as she witnesses Lazarus’ resurrection at Simon’s house, the resurrection of Christ, as well as initiates the conversion of the King and Queen of Marseilles, whom she is sent to convert. She challenges the heathen gods of Marseilles, causing a monument in their temple to “tremill and quake.” Ultimately, Mary Magdalene’s story (and the play) ends once she retires to the wilderness, surviving solely on manna from heaven before she ascends into the magical stagecraft of the play stage.

In its broad scope and wandering plot, the Digby *Mary Magdalene* encompasses many of the themes traced in earlier chapters: domestic relationships between fathers, children, siblings, and between husbands and wives; scurrilous conversations about sex; a concern for what goes in and stays out of women’s bodies; and, finally, the relationship between a subject and his (or her) earthly or spiritual sovereign. Additionally, the sustained attention to an intended female audience and domestic readership of MS Harley 2253 and the Findern manuscript establishes the framework to think about the bodies performing and the audiences watching, indeed participating in, the Digby *Mary Magdalene*. We investigate, for example, in what ways Mary Magdalene functioned as

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<sup>251</sup> For the text of the Mary Magdalene play, see Bevington’s *Medieval Drama* (Boston, 1975).

an exemplar of female piety and good behavior for those in the audience who are asked to join in the singing of *Te Deum*, incorporated into the orthodox ending of the play.

Finally, its focus on the female body, specifically Mary Magdalene's "castle," as well as the dichotomous vulnerability of her body and power of her speech, aligns the 16<sup>th</sup>-century religious play with the other cases of the obscene, genital poetics of the body I've traced in this project.

Mary Magdalene's body is of primary interest in this play, her sexuality emphasized, her movement surveilled, her spiritual power praised, her miraculous ascension to heaven embodied on the medieval stage and page. In the unique tavern scene contained in MS Digby 133, in which Mary Magdalene falls for the temptations of the World, the Flesh and Lechery, her body is the object of Satan's desire, ultimately resulting in its penetration. In an effective conflation of literal and figural language, Satan describes Mary as a "may" who "Of that *castel* berith the prise" [ital.. added] (416, 417). This recalls the conventional language comparing women to precious prizes, or jewels, guarded in secret gardens or within strong enclosed walls.<sup>252</sup> Jerome illustrates the relationship between a man's house, his wife, and her "fortress:"

If you give her the management of the whole house, you are reduced to being her servant... But what is the good of even a careful guardian, when an unchaste wife cannot be watched... It is difficult to guard what many long for... a fortress is captured which is attacked on all sides.<sup>253</sup>

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<sup>252</sup> See, for example, Grosseteste's *Chasteu d'Amour* and Piers Plowman's castle.

<sup>253</sup> Alcuin Blamires, Karen Pratt, and C. William Marx, eds., *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: An Anthology of Medieval Texts* (Oxford, 2002), 71.



In this passage, Jerome represents the wife's chastity as a fortress, bombarded on all sides by suitors whether she is "beautiful" or "ugly."<sup>254</sup> A woman's fortress is to be guarded and surveilled against attack and penetration. The alternative, as the Pearl poet describes, is to lose "that privy perle withouten spot." Recall, too, the language of *Le Roman de la Rose*, in which Guillaume de Lorris formulates his primary conceit around the image of the "large and roomy garden, entirely enclosed by a high crenelated wall."<sup>255</sup> The sexual connotations of the rose found inside the garden resonate in *Sawles Warde* as well, wherein a "hus" represents "seolf the mon. Inwith, the monnes wit I this hus is the huse-lauerd, ant te fulitohe wif mei beon Wil ihaten, thet gat het hus efter hire, ha diht hit al to wundre, bute Wit ase lauerd chasti hire the betere ant bineome hire ofte muchel of thet ha walde."<sup>256</sup> Wit is the houselord of man, Will the unruly wife. The precious "treosor" inside the house is "his ohne sawle," which is susceptible to the wiles of "the theof of helle."<sup>257</sup> Drawing on how the role of the castle functions similarly in the *Castle of Perseverance*, Joanne Findon argues that Mary Magdalene's castle is a "fortress of the soul."<sup>258</sup> The architectural metaphor in this example, along with other images like walls,

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<sup>254</sup> The Wife of Bath refers to this conceit in her Prologue as an example of misogynist statements against women and marriage: "Thou seyst men may nat kepe a castel wal. / It may so longe assailed been overall" (263-264).

<sup>255</sup> See Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *The Romance of the Rose*, trans. Charles Dahlberg (Princeton, 1971), 32.

<sup>256</sup> Bella Millett and Jocelyn Wogan-Brown, *Medieval English Prose for Women: From the Katherine Group and Ancrene Wisse* (Oxford, 1990), 87.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>258</sup> Joanne Findon, *Lady, Hero, Saint: the Digby Play's Mary Magdalene* (Toronto, 2011), 165.

castles, and gardens as allegories for the soul are conventional. For example, the protected and fortified City of Ladies, Christine de Pizan writes, “will be stormed by numerous assaults, [but] it will never be taken or conquered.”<sup>259</sup> Women’s space is figured as an alternately vulnerable or impenetrable edification, with sexual as well as spiritual connotations. But the specifically embodied connotations of the architectural metaphor applies in the case of the Digby *Mary Magdalene*, where the possibilities of invasion of her castle indicate temptation, sexual sin, and even rape.

Mary Magdalene is literally left in charge of her father’s castle in the world (and the stagecraft) of the play while her body is metaphorically represented as a besieged tower whose virginity is endangered and ultimately lost. As Susan Haskins surmises,

The unbreached castle is one of the many attributes of the Virgin Mary, symbolizing her unbroken virginity, and in medieval romance chaste and noble ladies were besieged in the castle of love... In the case of Mary Magdalene, the same symbolism applies, in the Digby play, as the vices besiege the castle of her chastity.<sup>260</sup>

Inside is the enclosed, domestic space of Magdalene’s castle and outside are the dangers posed in the world.<sup>261</sup> Indeed, the dangerous world of the public tavern is where the “entrye” into Mary Magdalene’s body is staged. Satan commands the evil spirits: “Wisely to werke, hir favor to winne, / To *entyr* hir person by the labor of Lechery, / That she at the last may com to helle” [ital. added] (431-4). A physical rape is just barely

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<sup>259</sup> Christine de Pizan, *Book of the City of Ladies* (London, 1983).

<sup>260</sup> Susan Haskins, *Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor* (London, 1993), 167.

<sup>261</sup> See Sarah Stanbury, “Space and Visual Hermeneutics in the “Gawain” Poet.” *The Chaucer Review* 21.4 (1987): 476-489 at 477, where she investigates “the image of the body as a castle, whose wardens... protect the soul.” She refers to the use of the “common motif” in *Piers Plowman* and Chaucer’s *Tale of Melibee*.

guised here in the language of production, work, labor, and consent, but the conventional metaphor of female sexuality -- the castle keeping a precious prize inside -- is explicit. When Mary Magdalene ultimately “graunttyd him al his bones” (532), even her sexual deviance, therefore, is framed as a female’s submission to masculine penetration, control, desire and power. In granting all of Lechery’s boons – his requests and desires – Mary Magdalene opens her body to penetration. Thus, in the Digby play of *Mary Magdalene*, by representing the saint’s body as a castle, vulnerable to Satan’s attack, an explicitly sexual entrance (quite literally) into her vagina is euphemized in the language of architecture and “entrye.” The Digby playwright develops the thematic of body as edifice by emphasizing other movements in and out of liminal spaces, thresholds, and bodies during the course of the play.<sup>262</sup> Finally, the play climaxes with the purgation of devils from Mary Magdalene’s body, and her ultimate demise after thirty years of abstaining from “wor[l]dly fodes”

In order to grasp the full impact of the Mary Magdalene play’s incorporation of figurations of the female body, its frailties and thresholds, as well as the implications of its portrayal of the purgation and the demise of Mary Magdalene’s body, through an investigation of the movements in and out of her castle, it is essential first to place the Digby manuscript and its collected saints’ plays in the tradition of medieval drama’s meditation on the Magdalene figure since its inception in the Latin liturgy, as well as representations of women’s roles in salvation history. We will also investigate the

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<sup>262</sup> The idea of crossing a threshold or entering a space as a sexual act is explored particularly effectively in the pastourelle genre. See, for example, “De Clerico et Puella” in MS Harley 2253.

bibliographic history of the manuscript and its East Anglian origins, because the rich literary tradition of performative texts about women (and in some cases for women, or by them) repeatedly reinterprets and performs women's voices and experiences to represent anti-feminist stereotypes as well as exemplars of piety. The *Mary Magdalene* play draws on these long traditions and anthologizes in one comprehensive drama several aspects of the devotional, performative, embodied female religiosity that characterizes East Anglian literature and culture in the fifteenth century.

In this chapter, I begin by tracing the problem of women in medieval drama from its inception inside the liturgy to the vernacular, secular dramas played out in the town in order to reveal the genre's obsession with performing women's voices – both resistant and subordinate – as well as its particular fascination with the figure of the Magdalene. I go on to discuss the East Anglian tradition of devotional texts and women's literature and of readers and audiences for a rich, literate culture of performance, print and manuscripts. I propose that in the context of its unique position in the history of religious drama, as well as in the tradition of East Anglian feminine, performative and devotional texts, the language of “entrye” and “abstinence,” or movements into and out of Mary Magdalene's body, is a significant thematic element that contributes a cohesive unity to the Digby drama. In the penultimate section, I suggest the significance of the additions and alterations that the Digby playwright made to the representations of other Magdalenes in medieval religious and vernacular culture. Finally, I investigate the designs on the audience that the thematics of the body developed throughout the Digby *Mary Magdalene* implies.

## Playing Her Part: Women in Medieval Drama

By representing and performing women's embodied experiences and revealing the power dynamics at work in the regulation and control of those bodies, MS Digby 133, in its collection of four 16<sup>th</sup>-century miracle plays, has an important role in the history of medieval drama and vernacular religious literature in England. These late examples of vernacular, religious, non-cycle plays, including *The Killing of the Children of Israel*, and the saints' plays *The Conversion of Saint Paul* and *Mary Magdalene*, are some of several surviving playtexts from East Anglia, including the N-town plays as well as the cycles of Chester, Wakefield, and York. More generally, the Digby plays participate in a long history of drama in English, beginning with liturgical performance in the church, continuing through Corpus Christi plays, secular and religious non-cycle plays, moralities and humanist dramas, and leading ultimately to the early modern dramatists including Shakespeare. This teleological approach to the history of English drama dominated much scholarship for the past century, as evidenced in claims such as the following:

Medieval religious drama is valuable not only for itself, but as a preparation for the golden age of English drama. The staging of the miracles and moralities (the use of a balcony, of unlocalized playing-space, mechanical effects, and music) and the freedom of the medieval playwrights in 'mingling kings and clowns' – all these things were a part of the heritage of the great Elizabethan dramatists.<sup>263</sup>

But indeed, medieval drama evidences a rich medieval culture negotiating sacred and secular stories and spaces, playing with representation and performance, and exploring

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<sup>263</sup> A.C. Cawley, *Everyman and Medieval Miracle Plays* (London, 1993), xxiii.

the relationship between gender and dramatic genre. By tracing its origins and development until the 16<sup>th</sup> century in this section, I will enumerate vernacular drama's engagement with issues of gender, corporeality, and resistance, which forms a significant context for reading the Digby *Mary Magdalene*.

David Bevington's *Medieval Drama* anthology begins aptly with the genre's "liturgical beginnings." He argues that perhaps to "give immediacy to religious worship," the Latin Catholic liturgy incorporated dramatic elements such as altars, clerical robes, gestures, procession, chanting, biblical plots, and "symbolic role-playing."<sup>264</sup> Dramatic elaborations contributed to the spiritual efficacy of the mass at Christmas and Easter, and to represent the biblical stories of Daniel, Lazarus and Paul among others. Dramatic performances of *The Visit to the Sepulchre* [*Quem quaeritis*] scene originated as part of the Easter liturgy, for example. In it, clerics dramatized the appearance of the risen Christ to the three mourning women at the tomb, one of whom is Mary Magdalene. In fact, the *Quem Quaeritis* features the three Marys – Mary, the mother of Jesus; Mary Magdalene; and Mary, the cousin of Jesus, which makes the *Quem Quaeritis* arguably the first *Mary Magdalene* play.

A consequence of the incarnational theology and devotional practices characterizing later medieval religious practice, the *Quem Quaeritis* scene served a didactic purpose, allowing witnesses of the church service to see and believe the risen Christ as the mourning women did. In the scene, "four brethren vest themselves... in copes... in imitation of the angel seated on the tomb and the women coming with spices

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<sup>264</sup> David Bevington, *Medieval Drama*, 4-5.

to anoint the body of Jesus.”<sup>265</sup> Costumes, performances, and props: these play-like features inside the Catholic mass showcased performers imagining, indeed embodying, the voices and persons represented in the foundational biblical narrative of crucifixion and resurrection. Thus, gendered dynamics functioned in this early drama, as clerics represented female subjects, an imagined cross-dressing that culminates in the Elizabethan practice. By incorporating Christ’s appearance to the women into the liturgy, the clerics authorized and validated these women’s experiences in the salvation history of the church, an alternately empowering inclusion, but one that also coopted these women’s bodies into the masculine realm of the Latin liturgy and the patriarchal structure of the institutionalized Catholic religion.

In the Corpus Christi cycles, of which we have many surviving play-texts and related documentary evidence, representations of women’s virtues and vices proliferated, drawing on the opportunities the genre provided for representing idealized women and anti-types of stereotypically bad women to a public audience. The first woman Eve appears in the York “Fall of Man” pageant, in all of her Edenic innocence and vulnerability to temptation. Her first words uttered in the play are in response to Satan’s call. He entreats her: “Eve! Eve!,” to which she answers: “Who is there?,” signaling the beginning of her seduction by the “worm” in this scene.<sup>266</sup> In the Coventry pageant of “The Annunciation,” Christ’s mother, the Virgin Mary is the primary character, alongside

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<sup>265</sup> Bevington, *Medieval Drama*, 27.

<sup>266</sup> For all quotes from the “miracle plays,” see A.C. Cawley’s *Everyman and Medieval Miracle Plays*.

the angel Gabriel. Significantly for the themes I trace in this project, Mary's speech confirms her bodily submission to God's will:

Now, and it be that Lord's will  
Of my body to be born and for to be,  
His high pleasures for to fulfill,  
As his own handmaid I submit me.

These two figures – Eve and Mary, the fallen first mother and the Virgin mother of Christ – establish a binary spectrum within which other characterizations of women in the gendered and generic terms of medieval drama fall.

As much as the cycle plays portray examples of holy, religious women, they also relish in dramatizations of sinful, unruly women. In the *Wakefield Second Shepherds' Pageant*, it is, after all, Mak's wife's idea to hide the stolen lamb in her cradle, a blasphemous connotation of mishandling the infant Jesus. Most famously perhaps, the Chester play of *Noah's Flood* represents Noah's wife as the willful, disobedient wife illustrated in the Junius manuscript.<sup>267</sup> The first lines the guildsmen performed in her voice are a ventriloquization of misogynist stereotypes:

and we shall bring timber to,  
For we mun nothing else to do;  
Women be weak to underfo  
Any great travail. (65-68)

In addition to embodying misogynist accusations about weak spiritedness, Noah's wife articulates a commitment to her sisterhood of "gossips" rather than to her patriarchal family. She rejects her husband's guidance, pronouncing:

Yea, sir, set up your sail,

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<sup>267</sup> Ibid., 33.



And row forth with eveil hail,  
For, without any fail,  
I will not out of this town.

In this way, Noah's wife serves as a comedic foil to the faithful, obedient figure of Noah. She exclaims, "For all thy Frankish far, / I will not do after thy rede" (100-101). She threatens not to step foot in the ark without her "gossips every one," and she tells Noah to "row forth... whither thou list, / and get thee a new wife" (207-208). The violence with which she is treated and to which she resorts in the end is a powerful climax of the tensions between coercion and resistance that are staged, rehearsed and performed in medieval mystery cycles.<sup>268</sup> While Noah's wife claims to relinquish any say over her husband's movements, telling him to go wherever he likes, Noah's patriarchal substitute, his son, tells his mother that "you shall [go], / Whether you will or nought" (243-244). The stage directions tell us that Noah's wife's last gesture in the play is to "box [her husband] on the ear." This violent, misogynist representation of the disobedient wife performs her resistance but is ultimately reincorporated into the authority of the sacred, heterosexual family. As Birkholz writes, although Uxor Noe "refuses to recant in deference to sacred history," and despite her "loud defiance, physical rebuttal, [and] recalcitrant silence," her "resistance to boarding the ark... is tantamount to an attempt at forestalling Christianity's sanctified trajectory."<sup>269</sup> Medieval audiences can laugh at

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<sup>268</sup> See Bakhtin's *Rabelais and his World* for a discussion of the carnivalesque; see also Claire Sponsler, *Drama and Resistance*.

<sup>269</sup> Dan Birkholz, "Mapping Medieval Utopia: Exercises in Restraint," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 36.3 (2006): 585-618 at 609-610. Birkholz states quite emphatically, "Noah's Wife is brought to heel" (611).

Noah's wife and tolerate her resistance because they know she gets on the boat eventually.

The performative nature of medieval drama makes it particularly adept at fleshing out gendered representations of human experience, a relatively safe space for practicing forms of obedience and subversion. By amplifying biblical stories, these "sprawling," capacious cycles covering all of salvation history and its players staged the negotiation of religious and domestic power in public. These mystery cycles were performed in the voices and by the bodies of town- and guildsmen in the streets, not clerics and churchmen. As Warning notes, we are a far cry from the Latin liturgical "performances" during Easter mass:

The performance no longer takes place on hallowed ground, but foris januam, that is, in front of the church or in the marketplace; the performers are no longer – at least, not exclusively – clerics, but laymen; these laymen now represent what they are not, and their roles undergo a quantitative elaboration which is entirely without parallel in the liturgical realm.<sup>270</sup>

As church and guild records show, performances for Corpus Christi celebrations were an enormous investment of time, resources, materials and labor, suggesting their popularity and cultural capital.<sup>271</sup> The payoff of attending to the history of medieval drama in the context of reading the Digby *Mary Magdalene* is that we begin to see the confluence of a long tradition of Mary Magdalenes, herself a compilation of the fallen and saintly

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<sup>270</sup> Rainer Warning, "On the Alterity of Medieval Religious Drama," *New Literary History* 10.2 (1979): 265-292 at 269.

<sup>271</sup> For one particular location's documents, see Elizabeth Baldwin, David Mills, and Lawrence M. Clopper's *Cheshire Including Chester* (Toronto, 2007). Innumerable records exist for a wide range of specific locales in East Anglia and beyond.

qualities of women, developing in the non-liturgical theater, where important cultural work of constructing gender and critiquing violence and betraying power dynamics is underway.

The “quantitative elaboration” of non-liturgical drama can be seen in the extant examples that survive of saints’ plays, conversion plays and secular dramas that were written and performed independently of the cycle tradition. A culture of performance thrived, in which professional groups of players emerged and performed itinerantly in the English countryside. Elaborate sets and wagons, costumes, props and players characterized early modern theater outside of the liturgy and cycle plays. The Digby plays are one of few late examples of non-liturgical drama; nevertheless they dramatize religious themes such as conversion, transsubstantiation, crucifixion, and resurrection. In the case of the *Mary Magdalene* play, the indebtedness to the tradition of liturgical and cycle dramas is clear in the inclusion of the *Quem Quaeritis* and resurrection of Lazarus scenes found also in the Latin liturgy. Additionally, the *Mary Magdalene* play features characters like Herod, who rants and raves as he does in the cycles, and *Mary Magdalene* treats a similarly ambitious narrative of fall and redemption as the all-encompassing pageant plays.

Although non-cycle dramas arguably emerged from earlier liturgical and religious drama, “this tradition [of vernacular religious drama] could only be constituted in opposition to the very religious cult to which it was seemingly subordinate.”<sup>272</sup> Examples of the secular, the comedic, the blasphemous, and the obscene also appear in English

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<sup>272</sup> Warning, “On the Alterity of Medieval Religious Drama,” 270.

non-cycle plays. In the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*, Jewish men are represented as bargaining to purchase and then torturing the host before their miraculous conversions. Their idolatrous blasphemy is performed in public as they plan to see if the host bleeds: “With this same dagger that ys so styf and strong, / In the myddys of thys print I thynke for to prene (466-47).<sup>273</sup> Such instances as this representative one of obscenity and blasphemy treated in such an irreverent, humorous manner constitute the very “opposition” to the liturgical tradition from which secular dramas emerged. Although often sanitized and coopted into an orthodox narrative at the end, elements of obscene comedy like we see in the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament* at least momentarily air resistant and unorthodox positions.

This subversive element of vernacular drama, in its essential departure from the Latin liturgical tradition, is also apparent in texts like the 14<sup>th</sup>-century Anglo-Norman interlude *Gilhote et Johane*, the early 15<sup>th</sup>-century morality *The Castle of Perseverance*, and the 16<sup>th</sup>-century humanist play “A Mery Play Betwene Johan Johan the Husbande, Tib His Wife, and Sire Johan the Preest.” These plays have no predecessor in liturgical dramas although they often meditate on religious themes or feature religious characters: Gilhote and Johane become preachers at the end of their tale; *The Castle of Perseverance* deals with religious topics such as sin and salvation; and the “Mery Play” has as one of its core characters, a priest. But the outrageous claims and actions of the women in these plays destabilize medieval gender relations in their dramatic representation and performance.

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<sup>273</sup> John C. Coldewey, *Early English Drama: an Anthology* (New York, 1993), 290.

*Gilhote and Johane*, for example, is a dramatic interlude featuring a sexually experienced woman and a young, virginal maid who discuss the benefits and means of cuckolding a husband and exerting your own agency about town. Although Johane initially resists, exhorting Gilote to “vous lessez / ceste male vie e vous amendez... pur doute de pecche e d’encombrer” [give up this bad life and amend out of fear of sin and of trouble] (21-24), the experienced woman retorts, “Je su en ioie e en iolyrete... de fere ce que me plect a ma volente” [I am in joy and in happiness... by doing that which pleases me at my will] (49-51). She prefers laying with her lovers over marrying, for she imagines a bad marriage as the ultimate earthly hell. At the end of the debate, Johane is converted, and they go about Winchester preaching the message of sexual independence in direct contradiction to traditional gender roles and the regulation of the female body: “nou ieouene femmes n’averon regart / Qe voqe ne veynes letter ne art” [We young women who never have seen writing nor learning, will have no concern for what friars and priests say] (268-269). There is no tidy moral to the end of this tale, no redemption imagined for the sinful souls. In contrast to the allegorical moralities which often staged Everyman’s sin and redemption, this secular drama was concerned with imagining what it meant to be a human body with desires and frailties in the world. We see this focus on women’s embodied experience in the Digby *Mary Magdalene* as well.

In tracing the origins of medieval drama, which gave rise to the vernacular saints’ plays in MS Digby 133 and *Mary Magdalene* specifically, I have outlined the genre’s concern with issues of gender representations of female bodies since its inception with the *Quem Quaeritis* scene in the Latin liturgy to the humanist drama of Medwell and

Heywood. Drawing from a spectrum of dramatic forebearers, including the tyrants' rants of the cycle plays, the *Quem Quaeritis* scene of the Latin liturgy, the allegorical besieged castle of the moralities, the unruly, sinful woman of the secular interludes and the penitent, redeemed sinner of the conversion play, the *Mary Magdalene* play exhibits an anthologistic impulse to represent women's experiences and bodies. The *Mary Magdalene* play also engages in medieval drama's rehearsal of gendered representations of women's sinfulness, domesticity, feminine religiosity, women's preaching, and the vulnerable female body, a tradition that extends back to the genre's liturgical beginnings. Women are everywhere in medieval drama, suggesting the genre's effectiveness for negotiating the relationship between women's bodies, women's voices, and structures of religious power. But as I argue in the next section, the prolific tradition of East Anglian literary, political, and religious culture inflects the interpretation of the role of Mary Magdalene's body -- or the place of her castle -- in salvation history. Doubling down on the genre's fascination with performing women's bodies and voices, the Digby play of *Mary Magdalene* also employs the feminine poetics of East Anglia's vernacular literature. The effect, as we will see, is that in the context of medieval drama's complicated representations of gender and East Anglian literature's incarnational aesthetics, we see that the Digby *Mary Magdalene* employs a genital poetics for its coercive religious purposes.

### **East Anglian Literature and MS Digby 133**

Bodleian Library MS Digby 133 is an East Anglian 16<sup>th</sup> century collection of religious drama, including *Candelmas day and the Kylling of the children of Israel*, *The Conversion of St. Paul*, the *Play of Mary Magdalene*, and an excerpt of *Wisdom*, which is found in its entirety in the Macro manuscript. One of the few surviving collections of medieval non-cycle plays, MS Digby 133 was collated in the 17<sup>th</sup> century with alchemical and mystical texts, some of which were written by the Elizabethan physician and alchemist, Simon Forman.<sup>274</sup> The manuscript also contains other excerpts by Galileo and Roger Bacon, as well as the tracts *De Theorica Trium Superiorum (Planetarum)*, *De Epicyclo Lunae*, and *De Capite et Cauda Draconis*, which are in the same mid-sixteenth-century hand.<sup>275</sup> But some of the manuscript's contents are dated much earlier (1490-1520), as two bibliographic facts suggest. First, some of the manuscript's watermarks were produced in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. One of the marks in particular, a hand "with laced wrist, a cross on the palm, fingers together and thumb apart... surmounted by a five-pointed star," was used by the 15<sup>th</sup>-century gentry Paston family, which suggests that the paper was in circulation prior to 1506.<sup>276</sup> In addition, *Mary Magdalene*, and two other texts in the manuscript are signed with either the initials MB, or the full signature of one

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<sup>274</sup> John Coldewey lists the other non-cycle plays that also originated in East Anglia in "The non-cycle plays and the East Anglian tradition" in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, ed. Richard Beadle and Alan J. Fletcher (New York, 2008), 219-220.

<sup>275</sup> See Baker, *The Late Medieval Religious Plays of Bodleian MSS Digby 133 and E Museo 160*. (Early English Texts Society 283, 1982), ix.

<sup>276</sup> Baker, *The Digby Plays*, lxiii. See also Baker, D.C. and J.L. Murphy. "The Late Medieval Plays of MS. Digby 133: Scribes, Dates, and Early History." *Research Opportunities in Renaissance drama*.

Myles Blomefylde, who also signed the copy of Henry Medwell's *Fulgen and Lucres*.<sup>277</sup>

Myles Blomefylde was a monk at the Bury St. Edmunds abbey in East Anglia in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century. Scholars have suggested that his (possibly familial) tie to the older William Blomfeld was the avenue through which the younger Blomefylde acquired the 15<sup>th</sup>-century dramas contained in the manuscript. As Theresa Coletti surmises:

The alchemists Blomefylde and Blomfeld obviously knew each other and may even have been related: Myles's notations regarding William's professional and learned accomplishments on his copy of William's alchemical treatise, *The Regiment of Life*, are a major source of knowledge about the elder Blomfeld."<sup>278</sup>

Blomfeld, who was associated with the abbey at Bury St. Edmunds in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century, presumably passed on a collection of playtexts to the younger Myles Blomefylde, who signed and compiled the manuscript in its current state in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century. The manuscript history and provenance suggest that the plays collected in MS Digby 133 existed in distinct manuscripts until they were compiled early in the sixteenth century. The first and last pages of *Wisdom*, for example, are "quite dirty," suggesting that it was used for some time before its inclusion in the Digby manuscript with the later texts on astrology and geomancy.<sup>279</sup> The last three texts, a significant portion of the 169 folios in the manuscript, are the sequence of medieval dramas, *Mary Magdalene*, *Killing of the Children*, and the excerpt from *Wisdom*, a generic continuity that seems to organize

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<sup>277</sup> *The Plays of Henry Medwell, A Critical Edition*.

<sup>278</sup> Theresa Coletti, *Theater, Gender, and Religion in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia, 2013), 37.

<sup>279</sup> Baker, *The Digby Plays*, lxiii.



the manuscript's contents, as the *Conversion of St. Paul* appears earlier in the manuscript as well.

Although scholars generally do not contest Baker's dating of the manuscript's contents or his theory about the transmission history of the manuscript coming through Bury St. Edmunds and into the hands of Myles Blomefylde, the possible performance history of the plays contained in MS Digby 133 is the subject of a long and contentious critical conversation. While no specific details about performance are included in the manuscript, sites such as Norwich, Lynn and Chelmsford have been proposed.<sup>280</sup> Arguably, it would have taken significant resources and technology to stage a play as theatrically complex as *Mary Magdalene*, so records indicating possession or construction of elaborate stagecraft are particularly interesting when attempting to locate these plays.<sup>281</sup> The *Mary Magdalene* play, after all, meditates on the integral relationship between location and staging, imagining over a dozen different locales from the stages of the Emperor, Herod, Pilate, the World, Pride, and Covetousness to the Castle of Magdalen, Simon "the Leper's house" to Marseilles, an "arbor", the "wildirnesse," a pagan temple, a "tavern in Jerusalem," and a "ship" that enters and exits the "place." As the term indicates, a place and scaffold set of structures in a relatively large regional town would seem an ideal location for staging these plays. The moving ship that travels from

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<sup>280</sup> Theresa Coletti summarizes the positions in the debate in *Mary Magdalene and the Drama of Saints*, 38.

<sup>281</sup> See Hilton Richard Leslie Beadle, *The Medieval Drama of East Anglia: Studies In Dialect, Documentary Records And Stagecraft* (York, 1977); John C. Coldewey, "The Digby Plays and the Chelmsford Records." *Research opportunities in Renaissance drama*, vol. 18 (1975): 103-. See also a plethora of documents online using the Records of Early English Drama database.

scaffold to scaffold perhaps required a type of wagon or cart for staging as well. In addition to the innovative use of staging and place, the Digby *Magdalene* contains some of the most elaborate spectacles in medieval drama. There are two resurrection scenes; calling Lazarus from the dead pre-figures Christ's resurrection later in the play. Later, when Mary Magdalene arrives in Marseilles and the King challenges her God, an idol miraculously trembles and quakes and a "clowd" descends from heaven and "sett[s] the tempyl on a fier." Finally, the play seems to call for an elaborate stage technology, whereby Angels and Devils descend from heaven and hell, as in the following stage direction: "Here shall t[w]o angylles desend into wildirnesse; and other t[w]o shall bring an oble, opynly apering aloft in the clowddes. The t[w]o benethyn shall bring Mary, and she shall receive, the bred, and than go agen into wildirnesse."<sup>282</sup> There is an opportunity in these elements of the plot, settings, and stage directions for a complicated, technical staging of the play in one of the regional centers such as Norwich, although the transmission history likely brought MS Digby 133 through Bury St. Edmunds via Myles Blomefylde, who was also churchwarden of the nearby Chelmsford for some time. It is interesting that according to Chelmsford records, a technically complex play was apparently staged there in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century, approximately contemporaneous with the date of the *Mary Magdalene* play.<sup>283</sup> While we may never know whether or where the plays contained in MS Digby 133 were staged, the Digby plays' provenance in an East Anglian cultural center provides the context for reading its bodily and genital poetics, for

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<sup>282</sup> See Bevington, *Medieval Drama*, 749.

<sup>283</sup> See Coldewey, "The Digby Plays and the Chelmsford Records."

East Anglian literature is characterized by its particularly devotional, performative, and feminine tradition.

Centers such as Norwich, Bury St. Edmunds, and Chelmsford in East Anglia were a hotbed of literary activity in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, and the region more generally was one of the richest (financially and culturally) regions of England at the time. The wool and cloth trade funneled wealth into the area while religious and literary activity flourished. Describing the religious proclivity of East Anglia, Theresa Coletti writes:

it was also a region that nurtured an exceptionally vital yet coherent religious culture, manifested in a remarkable melding of monastic and lay pieties and rendered visible in the hundreds of parish churches, many richly appointed, that still dot the East Anglian landscape.<sup>284</sup>

In this region of religious fervor and a proliferation of individual pieties, Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich expressed their personal religiosity to varying degrees of criticism while seeds of reformation took hold in the lay religion. As John Coldewey suggests in his study of the non-cycle plays and the East Anglian tradition, the perfect coincidence of factors created the environment from which the Digby *Mary Magdalene* was produced:

Taken all together, the prosperity at almost every level of the social order, the development of lay piety, and the consolidation of ecclesiastical and political power in East Anglia conspired to produce a uniquely dense, rich and generally stable rural society, and one with definite literary pretensions.<sup>285</sup>

Due to its cultural “prosperity,” then, East Anglia boasts some of the most exceptional later medieval texts produced outside of London, including saints’ lives and cycle plays,

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<sup>284</sup> Coletti, *Mary Magdalene and the Drama of the Saints*, 5. See also Gibson, *The Theater of Devotion: East Anglian Drama and Society in the Late Middle Ages* (Chicago, 1989).

<sup>285</sup> John C. Coldewey, “The non-cycle plays and the East Anglian tradition,” 215.

visionary religious texts, and contentious performance pieces by authors as diverse as John Lydgate, William Capgrave, Margery Kempe, and Julian of Norwich.

For Coletti, the East Anglian tradition of vernacular writing serves as an alternative to the laureate- and London-centered view of literary history, one that prioritizes performative and devotional texts like “Lydgate’s *Life of Our Lady*, the N-Town *Mary Play*, the Digby plays... the Macro *Wisdom*, Julian’s *Revelation of Love*, Kempe’s *Book*, Bokenham’s all-female legendary, and Capgrave’s *Life of Saint Katherine*.”<sup>286</sup> The tendency toward representing women and an interest in regulating female behavior are evident in this selection of East Anglian texts. The subjects are gendered; many of the primary figures are women, and as a result of the dominant theology of the incarnation of Christ, bodily experience -- specifically women’s embodied experiences of spirituality -- was a focus in these texts. For example, Margery Kempe’s narrative lingers on questions about her marital relationship, and about who has mastery and dominion in the home and in the bedroom as well. As Coletti observes, these East Anglian texts often feature “gendered inflections through direct engagement with feminine subject matter and symbolism.”<sup>287</sup> Many of the literary texts produced in the later medieval period in East Anglia model exemplars of feminine piety, betraying an interest in regulating women’s behavior and, implicitly, women’s bodies.

A number of East Anglian texts, in fact, explicitly exhort readers to follow the example of the literary/historical/religious figures contained therein. In the prologue to

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<sup>286</sup> Coletti, *Mary Magdalene and the Drama of the Saints*, 7.

<sup>287</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

The *Life of Saint Katherine*, the poet claims that through his work, “It schall be know of man, mayde, and of wyffe, / What thu hast suffrede and eke what thu hast doo” (66-67).<sup>288</sup> While Saint Katherine serves as a model for every Christian “man,” she is particularly exemplary for the “mayde” and “wyffe” as a model of her gender.<sup>289</sup> Her narrative, in a radically complicated relationship with patriarchal religious orthodox power, endorses the efficacy of women’s speech and preaching. Bokenham’s *Book of Holy Women* also models exemplars of feminine speech and behavior, from the “blessed virgin” Saint Margaret to the redeemed sinner Mary Magdalene.<sup>290</sup> These East Anglian texts exemplify the feminine, devotional characteristics of the region’s literary tastes and trends. With its focus on female figures and women’s embodied experiences in secular and spiritual contexts, the East Anglian literary tradition developed a unique, gendered perspective on social and salvation history.

While the saints’ lives and exemplary narratives conveyed in East Anglian devotional texts often appeal to stereotypes of feminine sinfulness and exhort conformity to gendered norms of social and spiritual comportant, however, a thread of performative and dramatic texts critique gendered hierarchies and voice women’s complaints.

Lydgate’s *A Mumming at Hertford*, for example, is an East Anglian “performance piece” airing husbands’ complaints against their wives, the wives’ answers, and a judgment in

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<sup>288</sup> John Capgrave, *The Life of Saint Katherine of Alexandria*, ed. Karen A. Winstead (Notre Dame, 2011), 17.

<sup>289</sup> Baker, in “The Digby Plays,” writes that Mary Magdalene, too, was “translated... into Everyman, representing as she did to medieval man the victory of grace, contrition, and penance over human frailty” (xli).

<sup>290</sup> Bokenham, *Legendys of Hooly Wummen*, ed. Mary S. Serjeantson (Oxford, 1971), 5.

favor of the ladies. As Nicole Nolan Sidhu argues, gender dynamics are integrally at stake in this performance.<sup>291</sup> Lydgate draws on the anti-feminist stereotype of the violent, disobedient wife from gender comedy. In an unusual turn, however, it is the husbands' bodies that are vulnerable to their wives' dominion; indeed the women end up on top at the end of the *Mumming at Hertford*.<sup>292</sup> The husbands and wives submit themselves to royal protection and authority, and the king withholds judgment, claiming that the "statuyt of olde antiquytee," which supports the "maystrye" of wives over their husbands holds precedence in this case. Of course, the comedy in this complaint/debate/performance poem revolves around the irony that by nature, custom and institution, husbands are the earthly and spiritual heads of the family and indeed of the state as well. Like other East Anglian texts, Lydgate dramatizes women's voices and perspectives, representing women's experiences and women as subjects, speakers, implied readers, and indeed authors of texts.

Significantly, these economic, religious, and literary activities in the region set the scene for the Digby plays. Attention to MS Digby 133's East Anglian context, therefore, highlights the manuscript's meditation on the liminal experience of women in society, women's religiosity, women's speech and preaching, and the regulations and spiritual liberation of women's bodies. Indeed the other dramatic texts included in MS Digby 133, in addition to the play of *Mary Magdalene*, exhibit characteristics of this East Anglian,

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<sup>291</sup> See Nicole Nolan Sidhu, "Henpecked Husbands, Unruly Wives, And Royal Authority In Lydgate's Mumming At Hertford," *The Chaucer Review*, 42.4 (2008): 431–460.

<sup>292</sup> For the original use of this terminology in literary theory, see Lesley Johnson, "Women on Top."

performative, devotional, and feminine literary tradition. The first play in MS Digby 133 is the *Conversion of St. Paul*. The plot and characters of the play are drawn from biblical sources about the apostle Paul, but the play begins with an act of Marian devotion, praising “Maria, that pure vyrgy[n] queen most excellent” (3).<sup>293</sup> Similarly, the *Candelmas day and the Kylling of the children* play begins with a meta-dramatic invocation to a female saint; the poet writes, “oure entent, / Is for to worshippe Oure Ladye and Seynt Anne” (18).<sup>294</sup> In fact, Donald Baker suggests that female players may have participated in the performance of the *Killing of the Children*, acting the parts of dancing virgins who “shewe summe sport and pleasure, / These people to solas, and to do God reuerens!” (54-55).<sup>295</sup> Women may have also played the important roles of the women with distaffs who beat Herod’s surrogate, Watkyn, when he slays their children.<sup>296</sup> Four speaking women resist the cruel power of the murderous patriarch in the play, one of whom says, “But we women shalle make ageyns you resistens, / After oure powere, youre malice to encumber! (303-304).<sup>297</sup> The texts in MS Digby 133, thus, praise women’s exemplarity and well as perform their resistance.

In this East Anglian context, the Digby *Mary Magdalene* is not just a medieval saints’ play drawing on a long history of liturgical and secular dramatic conventions, but

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<sup>293</sup> Baker, *The Digby Plays*, 1.

<sup>294</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>295</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>296</sup> Baker, *The Digby Plays*, lxiii.

<sup>297</sup> Ibid., 106.

a literary artifact in the East Anglian tradition, characterized by a devotional, performative framework and by a thematic focus on women's speech, women's bodies, and their agency. Specifically, as I will argue in the next section, the Digby playwright's figuration of Mary's body as a castle represents her spiritual journey as a series of attempted invasions, entries, blockades, expulsions, prohibitions and invitations into and out of Mary Magdalene's body and soul.

### **“Entrye” and “Abstinens”: Navigating from sinner to saint in the Digby *Mary Magdalene***

East Anglian religious and literary culture in the late 15<sup>th</sup> and early 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, then, set the stage for the production of MS Digby 133 and the saints' plays contained therein. The lives of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe resonate in the spiritual independence of Mary Magdalene. In the powerful voice of the women in Lydgate's *Mumming at Hertford*, we hear the Digby Conversion of St. Paul's representation of the angry and violent women with distaffs. The maidens and wives who read narratives about exemplary women like Bokenham's *Legends of Holy Women* arguably are the very same audience of the tales of saints and the allegory of Everyman contained in MS Digby 133. Thematically and contextually, women punctuate many East Anglian texts in general, the plays contained in MS Digby 133, and the Digby *Mary Magdalene* specifically. From the incarnational spirituality of the female mystics to the imagined bodies of the Hertford wives and the sacrificial bodies of the female saints, women's bodies in particular are a representational focus in these texts. The East Anglian literary



tradition of female religious women, readers and literary figures prime the readers' attention to the poetics of the female body in the Digby *Mary Magdalene*, wherein the saint's vulnerable body is represented as a besieged castle.

As I argue in this section, the Digby play's architectural conceit figures the body as a threshold vulnerable to "entrye," or a figurative rape. Thus, the poetics of the castle is also a poetics of the female body, in fact a genital poetics. In a pivotal scene in the play, Magdalene's fall is staged in a tavern, where the playwright figures the "entry" into Magdalene's castle as a spiritual and bodily invasion, which prefigures her fall and later salvation. Additionally, the Digby playwright highlights the biblical scene in which Jesus purges Mary Magdalene's body of the devils who entered it, a type of restored virginity. Once the saint's body is restored, it becomes invulnerable to physical threats, and she maintains her bodily integrity inside the home and out in the world. While Joanne Findon has argued that movements up and down a hierarchy are the primary figures in the *Magdalene* play, I would like to suggest that the Digby play is concerned in this and other scenes with intrusive and expulsive movement, or movements in and out: of domestic spaces, of the dangerous public tavern, on the unpredictable sea, in the privacy of the king's bedroom, and in the austerity of the wilderness.<sup>298</sup> Below, I investigate the movements into and out of Magdalene's castle, and figurations of what goes into and out of Magdalene's body in order to reveal the spectre of sexual violence, the possibility of gendered agency and the spectacle of the female body in the Digby *Mary Magdalene*.

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<sup>298</sup> Joanne Findon, "Now is aloft that late was ondyr," in *Mary Magdalene in Medieval Culture: Conflicted Roles*, eds. Peter Victor Loewen and Robin Waugh (New York, 2014).

Mary Magdalene's namesake is her father's castle, her domicile. Her father gives to her the Castle Magdalene for her maintenance and sustenance. He leaves to "Mary, this castell alonly, an[d] non othyr," and this initiates what Findon calls "a series of parallels and oppositions between bodies and houses (for instance, between the body of Mary and her home)."<sup>299</sup> The domestic, protected space of the castle is conflated with Mary Magdalene's body and soul. Thus, a defended castle connotes spiritual integrity as well as virginity. But heavy with grief after her father's sudden death, Mary Magdalene leaves her earthly castle, with which she had been entrusted, to her brother Lazarus, and as she departs from the domestic protection of her castle walls, she moves into the dangerous public domain of the tavern.<sup>300</sup> There, Mary Magdalene succumbs to the World, Flesh, and Satan's concerted assault on her metaphorical castle. As these ominous characters physically threaten the saint's body, Mary Magdalene's sexual sin is represented as entrance into her castle. The deadly triumvirate enlists Lechery to lead the invasion, for as Flesh claims, "ye, Lady Lechery... ye shal sonest enter, ye beral of bewte" (422-425). And in the stage directions we hear that "her[e] shal alle the seven Dedly Sinnes besege the castell till [Mary] agre to go to Jherusalem. Lechery shall entyr the castell." Once Mary Magdalene surrenders control of her earthly castle, she is vulnerable to Lechery's pursuit of her metaphorical castle. Ultimately, she falls for the shallow rhetoric of Curiosity; after having their fill of wine and courtly flattery, the

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<sup>299</sup> Ibid., 81 and 247.

<sup>300</sup> See Joanne Findon, "Now is aloft that late was ondyr," in which she notes that the tavern is an intermediate "enclosed but public space that was notoriously dangerous for young women" (250).

couple agree to “dawns” and the pair “avoid” offstage, indeed avoiding an obscene staging of the sexual sins for which Mary Magdalene is so often associated from scripture and legend. The invasion of Magdalene’s castle allegorically represents the moral assault on Mary Magdalene’s soul, and as Mary Magdalene loses control over her castle, the playwright signals the involvement of Mary Magdalene’s body in sexual sin.

If the saint’s temptation and fall into sin involves an intrusion into her body and soul, then an essential component of Mary Magdalene’s salvation in the playtext involves the purgation of the influence of Satan and his companions from her body; Magdalene’s virginity must be restored; her body must be purified from the literal and figurative penetration and invasion that she experienced. At Jesus’ word to Mary to “vade in Pace” (691), the stage directions indicate that “seven dyllys shall devoide from the woman,” after which Mary praises Jesus for restoring her “sowle helth” (693). Whereas Mary Magdalene’s fall is staged as the siege on her castle -- a figurative rape, or a slide into sexual sin -- her salvation is imagined as the expulsion from her body when Jesus expels the devils and relieves Lechery’s hold on Mary Magdalene. Significantly, this moment of restoration occurs back in a domestic setting, specifically at Simon’s house. In this way, Mary’s movement from the castle Magdalene out to the tavern mirrored her descent into sin, and her turn toward saintliness involves her return to the domicile. Once her body is purified, in fact, Mary Magdalene returns to the castle Magdalene, reclaiming, if only temporarily, the earthly home where her spiritual journey began. Now that Mary Magdalene has been “made... clene” (751), she is “welcum onto [her] towere” (764), a

phallic image for domestic and earthly power, which represents the restoration of her soul and body into a narrative of salvation.

Once more, the saint's body is threatened – tested – as she travels alone on the journey to Marseilles. In this unique scene in MS Digby 133, Mary Magdalene boards the ship of her own volition, following God's call to convert the heathens she meets in the foreign land. Her restored bodily integrity is at stake as the saint's body is threatened by a scurrilous, bawdy figure of the shipmaster's boy. The shipmaster and his subordinate engage in a comedic dialogue, in which the shipmaster's boy alludes to his sexual appetite, claiming that he will be satisfied before he has his "mete" (1403). "Nothing butt a fayer damsel" will do (1412). The Magdalene's female body appears on stage at precisely this moment, an apparent answer to his desire. But just as she finds herself in a precarious situation, the audience's expectations are thwarted in a more favorable outcome for the saint's restored body.<sup>301</sup> And when Mary Magdalene needs the shipmaster and his boy's cooperation in a passage to Marseilles, they don't exploit or threaten or violate her. Instead, the master tames the boy's desire, beating the subordinate's body and quelling any danger he posed. This scene changes from a potentially dangerous scene (for the saint) outside in the world to one that ensures the exemplary nature of her experience in the world as one of bodily integrity despite the dangerous potential of pollution and penetration. She is past the point of allowing "entrye" into her body. She exhibits her bodily integrity by repelling sinful desires,

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<sup>301</sup> Similarly, rather than meeting a lover or worse in the arbor, Mary Magdalene finds a good angel.

protecting her metaphorical castle from assault, focusing instead on a bodily practice of “abstinens.”

Mary Magdalene’s performance of her religiosity culminates in a prohibition of the entry of food (except the eucharist) into her body. After the sprawling pilgrimage of the play’s plot, as the ship traveled from Marseilles to Jerusalem and back again, we find a simple stage direction: “Mary in erimo.” Again, Mary Magdalene’s movements out and about punctuate her spiritual life. She falls for Curiosity’s flattery while out in the tavern; she maintains her sacred call to Marseilles with her body intact, despite implied danger out on the sea; and finally she ends her apostolic life in abstinence out in the wilderness. “Of wor[d]ly fodes I will leve all refeccion” (2001), she promises, and anon she is answered by Jesus who calls the angels to relieve her “with gostly fode” (2006). Involving one of the most marvelous stagecrafts in the play, four angels descend from and Mary ascends into the clouds to receive “bred” in this scene. Thirty years have passed, and she only takes in the spiritual sustenance offered by the angels while foregoing all other meat and drink. Mary’s bodily “abstinens” is a stark contrast to the invasive threat to Mary’s body posed by Curiosity (1995). The saint does not allow any entry into her body, not even worldly foods. But Mary paradoxically employs images of fullness to describe the state of her soul: “Now am I full of joye and blisse” (2029). In a direct address to “thou Lord of lorddes,” she exclaims, “How thou devidist me from hounge and vexacion!” (2034). Not hungry but full of joy, the saint claims that Christ “fullfillit[h] me” and “fed me” (2037-2039). By practicing “abstinens,” or prohibiting

anything but ghostly food from entering the body, Mary Magdalene attains spiritual fulfillment.

As Carolyn Walker Bynum observes in *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* (1987), religious practices regularly involved the consumption or prohibition of food.<sup>302</sup> In a Christian society, the primary symbol of Christ's body as food in the Eucharist modeled a sacrificial relationship to spiritual and physical sustenance. Eating, or not eating, became a spiritual as well as a bodily activity. Women, in particular, traditionally fulfill roles of preparing and serving food, and thus, controlling the intake of food has been one way for women to exert agency in their lives, Bynum argues. Holy fasting characterizes a number of narratives about female Christian saints, and historical evidence of preaching against fasting or for moderation in fasting suggests that it was a widespread cultural activity. Significantly for my argument, the practice of fasting establishes the body as a barrier, prohibiting entry of food. Consuming food was associated with carnal and sensual desires; gluttony and lust both satisfy bodily appetites. Therefore, fasting, or "abstinens" in regards to food, prevents the "entry" of sinful elements into one's body, an image of expulsion similar to the purgation of devils that Mary Magdalene experiences in her conversion scene.

From the first time the playwright introduces Mary Magdalene, the image of her character and her body as an edifice alternately vulnerable to penetration and protected

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<sup>302</sup> Carolyn Walker Bynum devotes the first part of her book *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley, 2010) to the incarnational theology of Christ's body as food in the Eucharist. She investigates the relationship between this emphasis on eating as it develops into feasting and fasting traditions in Christian medieval culture. See also Rudolph M. Bell and William N. Davis, *Holy Anorexia* (Chicago, 1987), which focuses on the religious practice of prohibiting food, especially among religious women.

from invasion. Her sexual sin is allegorized as an invasion into her castle and her body while her salvation miraculously manifests in a purgation of devils from her body and soul. The saint's bodily integrity is impenetrable as Jesus restores her virginity and grants her salvation. During the comedic scene in which Mary Magdalene encounters the shipmaster and his boy, although her body is vulnerable to the sexual desires of the men on whom she is dependent for safe passage, the saint remains intact through God's providence, despite the threat of rape. By charting the regulation of what goes in and stays out of Mary Magdalene's body, the playwright emphasizes the embodied nature of women's religiosity, both its potential vulnerability to literal and metaphorical ravishment, but also the possibility of asserting agency through abstinence, figured as a fullness rather than a lack. At the end of Mary Magdalene's pilgrimage, her spiritual journey, and her life, she has gone from the damsel in a besieged castle to a lover of Jesus, filled with spiritual food. The movements in and out of her castle track her progress from sinner to saint.

### **Other Mary Magdalenes in Medieval Religious and Vernacular Culture**

Mary Magdalene functioned as an exemplar for medieval lay and religious women as a figure navigating the tensions of inherited wealth and charity, sin and salvation and the gendered experience of women in Christendom. Juxtaposing the Digby play's Mary Magdalene to the saint's representation in other medieval texts, including devotional texts, secular dramas, sermons and cycle plays is particularly instructive, as the Digby playwright's additions and amplifications to the legendary story of this biblical

figure betray the unique focus in the Digby manuscript on highlighting the contradictory vulnerability and power of the female body. In other versions of the narrative of her life, Mary Magdalene is imagined as a more sensuous, fallen, and active sinner. But in an effort to emphasize her exemplarity, the Digby playwright downplays her sinfulness and sexual agency, staging her fall as a consequence of Satan's assault of her castle rather than as a result of Mary Magdalene's sexual sinfulness and bodily desires alone. The threats posed to Mary's body in the unique scenes at the tavern by Satan's minions and aboard the ship by the shipmaster and his boy draw attention to the subsequent power over her body that Mary Magdalene exhibits in the wilderness. In addition, the Digby Mary Magdalene establishes her role as an "apostlesse" and preacher whose powerful and effective voice is sanctioned by God.<sup>303</sup> For example, she is not set adrift at sea like the romantic convention of the female on a rudderless ship, but rather she travels to Marseilles on an explicit mission ordered by God to convert the heathens there.<sup>304</sup> These elements of Mary Magdalene's characterization in MS Digby 133 complement and challenge the images of Mary Magdalene that we get from other representations of her in medieval religious and vernacular culture.

In Bokenham's *Legend of Holy Women*, for example, Mary Magdalene is represented as a carnal sinner, far more lecherous than she is portrayed in MS Digby 133:

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<sup>303</sup> In William Caxton's English adaptation of *The Golden Legend: Or, Lives of the Saints, As Englished* (New York, 1973), he refers to Mary Magdalene as the "apostlesse of the apostles" (75).

<sup>304</sup> For a discussion of the trope of a heroine on a rudderless ship at sea in relation to the Mary Magdalene play, see Joanne Findon, "Mary Magdalene as New Custance?: 'The Woman Cast Adrift' in the Digby Mary Magdalene Play," *English Studies in Canada* 32.4 (2006): 25-50.



In her, then, were joined youth, wealth, and beauty. But for lack of proper supervision these qualities are often agents of insolence and importers of vice; and so they were in Mary Magdalen.

For she spent her youth so shamelessly in promiscuity, and was so common in sinfulness that she lost her good name. Her reputation in the city was so much for folly that they called her 'Mary the sinner.'

For a long time she continued in her wretchedness and pursued her desires, until at last she was goaded to remorse by our lord Jesus, who lived and taught virtue. Because of his teaching she intended to make amends for her previous way of life. (108)

According to Bokenham, she was not known for her affiliation with castle Magdalene as in Mirk's *Festial* and other versions of the story, but as an infamous sinner. Caxton, too, writes, "She submitted her body to delight, and therefore she lost her right name, and was called customably a sinner".<sup>305</sup> But Mary Magdalene's story is one of redemption, Bokenham suggests, for "as many various delights of sin as she had had in her body, so many sacrifices she made of herself".<sup>306</sup> Perhaps this sentiment anticipates the opposition of bodily indulgence versus abstinence that is so vividly portrayed in MS Digby 133. In Caxton's *Golden Legend*, we see a similar idea: "For as many delices as she had in her, so many sacrifices were found in her. And after her conversion she was praised by overabundance of grace. For whereas sin abounded, grace overabounded, and was more, etc"<sup>307</sup>. Thus Mary Magdalene's fall is figured as a result of her active sinfulness in other Magdalene stories; instead, in MS Digby 133, the playwright adds the scene in a contemporary tavern with allegorical figures assaulting Magdalene's castle. Her fall is

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<sup>305</sup> Caxton, *The Golden Legend*, 74.

<sup>306</sup> Bokenham, *Legendys of Hooly Wummen*, 107.

<sup>307</sup> Caxton, *The Golden Legend*, 73.

passive; the intrusion into her castle – indeed into her body – is figured as an invasion, a spiritual ravishment and a rape of her physical body, rather than a result of her sexual impropriety.

Other Magdalenes, too, emphasize the exemplarity of her life, both its sexuality and spirituality. Scholars have argued that Margery Kempe, in fact, modeled her lay religiosity on the life of the preaching, travelling Mary Magdalene, who was alternately sinful and devoted in body and spirit to Jesus.<sup>308</sup> In Margery Kempe's Preface, she remembers that the priest began transcribing her book "in the year of our Lord 1436, on the next day after Mary Magdalene" (38).<sup>309</sup> The editor notes that this feast date falls on 23 July, an otherwise inauspicious and arbitrary day to begin a literary endeavor, but perhaps the exemplary life of this lady sinner and saint plays a fundamental role in framing the narrative of Margery Kempe's life here at the beginning of the text. Perhaps the role of Mary Magdalene as an agent in her own secular and spiritual narrative inspired the confidence of Margery Kempe in her journey. In fact, Mary Magdalene's complicated relationship as a female preacher and exemplar challenged the cultural norms and canonical postures regarding women as spiritual teachers and public speakers, giving credence to Margery's defense against Lollardy and justification of her speech.

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<sup>308</sup> See, for example, Sarah Salih, "Staging Conversion," in *Gender and Holiness: Men, Women, and Saints in Late Medieval Europe*, eds. Samantha Riches and Sarah Salih (New York, Routledge, 2002), in which she suggests, "Margery, imitating the saints in her life and text, would then herself become a textual exemplar that feeds back into the hagiographic tradition" (131).

<sup>309</sup> Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, trans. B.A. Windeatt (New York, 1985), 32. See also Findon, *Lady, Hero, Saint*, 27 n. 80 for a list of the other times Mary Magdalene appears in Margery's book.

She has, after all, been called upon to emphasize the possibility of redemption for even the worst of female sinners – the sexually imprudent. In *Gilhote and Johane*, Gilhote defends her promiscuity by pointing to the figure of the Magdalene:

De la magdaleyne vous auez oy retere  
Qe peccheresse fust quant fust en terre.  
Ore est en ciel gloriose nere  
Par sa repentance e sa priere  
Si auez oi dire qe ele fust lors  
La plus orde femme qe vnque fust de cors,  
Pleyne de pecchie dedenz e dehors  
E pus de ces pecchez dieu fist deuors  
Autres ensamples dient plusour  
Qe dieus plaus ayme vn peccheour  
Qe se conuerte a chief de tour  
Qe nulle virgine par escriptour. (125-136)

[You have heard tell of the Magdalen  
Who was a sinner when she was on earth.  
Now she is a glorious lady in heaven  
By her repentance and her prayer.  
So you have heard tell that she was then  
The most filthy woman that ever was with respect to her body,  
Full of sin within and without,  
And then from these sins God separated her.  
Many other examples tell  
That God loves a sinner  
Who converts at the last minute  
More than any virgin according to scripture.]

While this reference to Magdalene emphasizes her bodily corruption and pollution, however, the Digby *Mary Magdalene* is a figure who exercises control over her body to gain a transformative bodily integrity modeled on the broken but powerful figure of the Eucharistic body.

Another significant difference in Bokenham's portrayal of the saint's life is that he frames Mary Magdalene's trip to Marseilles in terms of the romantic convention; she

was “set out on the sea in a ship with neither steering nor rudder, so that they would be drowned. But as God’s providence guided them, they arrived safely at Marseilles” (115). The Digby playwright, alternatively, has Mary Magdalene exert more agency in her obedience. She heeds a divine call to Marseilles, boarding the ship of her own accord. This sea journey affords the playwright the opportunity to parallel another scene of potential assault to Mary Magdalene’s body. While the tavern scene portrayed a successful assault on Mary Magdalene’s castle/body/soul, the complementary scene with the ship master’s boy highlights the protected nature of Mary Magdalene’s restored virginity after her conversion. The effect of the Digby playwright’s additions to Bokenham’s *Legend* is that Mary Magdalene’s exemplarity is focused around her bodily vulnerability and integrity, figured alternately as an assaulted and defended castle. In this way, as Mirk’s *Festial* proposes, the story of Mary Magdalene can be a “myrroure to alle sinful”.<sup>310</sup> Readers and audience members are invited to emulate her.

For in the *Mary Magdalene* play, as a consequence of its genre and the physical performance that it implies, the audience literally sees the exemplarity of the Magdalene figure rehearsed in town. But rather than emphasize her sinfulness, as other Magdalenes do, the Digby Mary Magdalene performs the progressive regulation of her body, as a model for the audiences’ – male and female – behavior. In other Magdalenes we hear of her thirty years of contemplation and asceticism, but in the Digby play we see the miraculous way in which heavenly manna and the eucharist provide all the bodily

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<sup>310</sup> John Mirk, *John Mirk's Festial: Edited from British Library MS Cotton Claudius A. II*, ed. Susan Powell (Oxford, 2009), 184.

nourishment that the saint requires for sustenance. The audience becomes a witness, like the priest in the wilderness, to God's miraculous providence. The performative effect of this visual rhetoric employed in the Digby *Mary Magdalene* amplifies the lesson that (bodily) sin can and should be purged by (bodily) penance. The coercive effects of this thematics of the body in the Digby play will be suggested in the following section of this chapter.

### **Sighting the Sacred: Performance, Authority and the Body**

When the priest who administers the eucharist to Mary Magdalene in the wilderness meets the saint, he says, "I wol pray yow hartely to she[w] me of yowr Lord" (2053). The King of Marseilles, too, asks Mary Magdalene to perform her faith: "Now, blissyd woman, reherse here present / The joyis of yowr Lord in heven" (1657-1658). The Digby *Mary Magdalene* is unique in this self-reflexive emphasis on the efficacy of performing one's faith. At Mary Magdalene's word, pagan monuments tremble, temples burn, and angels descend. This technical stagecraft works to impress the play's ideological claims more powerfully, but it also delineates vividly the real from the miraculous world of the play. As Greg Walker writes about this characteristic of medieval drama to blur the lines between earnest and game, or between play and reality:

Early drama... was, in one sense, completely without boundaries, as free as were the imaginations of playwright, actors, and audience to contrive new worlds and new matter within them, seemingly able to throw itself recklessly into the kind of self-absorbed, subversive play that embraces performance as an end in itself. Yet it was (and is) also, at one and the same time, all about boundaries, about establishing, testing, transgressing, dissolving, and re-establishing the fine lines between actors' space and

audience space, between there and then and here and now, between the play-full and the real... but, despite its moments of structured irresponsibility, it does even this knowingly and self-reflexively, never losing sight of its own responsibilities as a performance or those of its spectators as active witnesses, and of their shared involvement in drama's cultural work.<sup>311</sup>

In these self-conscious moments in the play when the fourth wall is broken, the audience is enlisted into the performance.

The playtext does not begin with a performance of the banns, as some other medieval dramas do, but rather with a meta-theatrical moment in which the Emperor Tiberius Caesar rants: "I command silyns, in the peyn of forfeitur, / To all min[e] audiens present general!" This commandment works to establish the tyrant's controlling demeanor, as well as to inform the audience that the play is beginning and to prescribe their attentive behavior. The play then ends with an address to the audience by the priest in the wilderness, in which he references the "processe... playid" at a particular location ("here") among "frendes." And he incites the audience with an imperative:

Sufferens, of this processe thus enddith[h] the sentens  
That we have playid in yowr syth.  
Alle-mythty God, most of magnificens,  
Mote bring yow to his blisse so brygth,  
In presens of that king!  
Now, frendes, thus endit[h] this matere.  
To blisse bring tho that byn here!  
Now, clerkys with voicys cler,  
Te Deum laudamus let us sing. (2132-2140)<sup>312</sup>

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<sup>311</sup> Greg Walker, "The cultural work of early drama," in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, ed. Richard Beadle and Alan J. Fletcher (New York, 2008), 96-97.

<sup>312</sup> *Castle of Perseverance* and the *Croxton Play of the Sacrament* end with this invitation to sing *Te Deum Laudamus* as well.

The audience is thus invited to participate in the play-making, which, as it turns out, is not entirely play-full but real in its spiritual effects. As Scoville remarks about this scene,

In calling for a canticle [Te Deum] to end the play, the Digby playwright attempts to move the audience to act as one in faith... by bringing the audience into the play as part of the final procession, the Digby playwright connects them bodily with the entirety of the Church of history; the audience's role is to be the same sacred community that the play has just evoked.<sup>313</sup>

As Findon describes in her discussion of the poetics of gendered space, by “using locus and platea staging, [the performance] would bring the audience very close to, even within, the public performance space.”<sup>314</sup> The use of messengers, too, would have audience members direct their attention (if not physically move) to different loca in the play area.

As the players perform statements of faith, conversion, resurrection and miracles, the audience functions in much the same role as the King and Queen of Marseilles, who are induced to believe based on the powerful visual rhetoric of modeling piety, obedience and seeing God's power in real, tangible forms. Significantly, their conversion is initiated by a showing of Mary Magdalene in their bedchamber and God's miraculous providence for them is shown in the maintenance of the Queen of Marseilles's life on the deserted isle, as well as her out of body pilgrimage to see the sights of the holy land. After arguably one of the most arresting visual miracles in the play, the resurrection of

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<sup>313</sup> Chester N. Scoville, *Saints and the Audience in Middle English Biblical Drama* (University of Toronto Press, 2004), 53.

<sup>314</sup> Findon, *Lady, Hero, Saint*, 159. Note also the drawing describing the staging of *Castle of Perseverance*, with the castle at the center of the playing space, and with the audience literally filling the spaces between the castle and the ancillary stages.

Lazarus, the stage directions declare that “all the pepull, and the Jewys, Mary, and Martha, with on[e] vois, sey thes[e] words: “we believe in yow, Saviowr, Jhesus, Jhesus, Jhesus!,” an invitation to chant with the players in a manner Gibson calls a “revival meeting chant.”<sup>315</sup> Thus, the visual rhetoric effectively displays God’s power through performance of miracles in the play-text as well as in the acting of the play in medieval East Anglia. The spectacles, including fires, sailing boats, magical stage crafts, and clouds have the epistemological effect of ensuring belief in the characters in the Digby *Mary Magdalene*, as they were surely intended to work on the audience as well. By the end of the play, the audience, like the pagan priest, the King and Queen of Marseilles, and indeed like Mary Magdalene herself, are coopted into the flock of the faithful, singing *Te Deum laudamus* together as they process out of the play-space into the world.

The thematics of the body explored throughout the play are employed at the service of this coercive, religious rhetoric. The Digby *Mary Magdalene* begins with a focus on her body, her castle, and ends with her starving body, and of course, Christ’s body in the form of the eucharist. Images of nourishment and embodiment, entry and abstinence, threatened violence and sacrifice culminate in the miraculous vision of Mary Magdalene taking the eucharist. But the bodily thematics in the play also implicates the bodies of the audience members as participants in this religious drama. In its focus on the body of Mary Magdalene, the Digby play reveals the sacrifices and submissions required of the body, as it ultimately coopts the audience’s body into religious practice by the end.

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<sup>315</sup> Gibson, *Theater of Devotion*, 107.



## Epilogue

### Towards a Transgender Genital Poetics

This project has investigated the discourse of the body, a specifically genital poetics, as it appears in a number of unique medieval manuscript collections, MSS Harley 2253, CUL Ff.1.6, and Digby 133. What I call genital poetics in this project was of course informed by Dinshaw's *Sexual Poetics*, in which she was concerned with "masculine and feminine as roles, positions, functions that can be taken up, occupied, or performed by either sex, male or female (although not with equal ease or investment)."<sup>316</sup> Nevertheless, hers is an embodied poetics too. Dinshaw argues that not only through discourse could different bodies "envision fully the place of the Other," (10) but in the case of Chaucer's canon, the sexual poetics "shows an important awareness of the difficult relations between abstract or figurative gender formulations and people with real bodies and 'sely instruments'" (12). In this way, it seems that a sexual, or even genital, poetics is always engaged in a body politics, revealing how gender-body relations stage and challenge dominant ideologies.

Drawing from this wellspring, my project has traced representations of the genitals, and of the vagina in particular – or, the cun, the purse, and the castle -- in terms at times playful, obscene, euphemistic, and sacred in a number of unique manuscript collections. I aim here to rehearse and complicate the claims I made about the effects of genital poetics, which are to critique the patriarchy and reveal the constitutive violence against women's bodies, to perform alternately subordinate and submissive or resistant

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<sup>316</sup> Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*, (Madison, 1989), 9.

roles, and to emphasize the relationship between the body and dominant ideologies and discourses. Recall the *Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*: critics are familiar with all of the figures of the female body she references – her thyng, queynte, quoniam, membre, and bele chose, among others. But as Nicole Nolan Sidhu remarks, this obscene, comedic language is used to a variety of ends, including to resist the decorous, orthodox order of things.<sup>317</sup> Clearly, obscenity and vulgarity are not the only effects of this language. However, scholars disagree about the use of bawdy talk in the *Canterbury Tales*. Lee Patterson claims that the Wife's obscene language is only working within the male author's control, ultimately within the constraints of patriarchal discourse.<sup>318</sup> According to this model, there is no way of stepping outside or resisting the dominant discourse. Ultimately, however, he qualifies this argument, suggesting that the Wife of Bath's voice both undermines and conforms to masculine language and modes of argument and orthodoxies of literary and sexual authority.

On the other hand, E. Jane Burns argues that these instances of "bodytalk" actually break outside or resist in unconventional and critical ways the discourse from which they arise. She finds in the medieval fabliaux voices that speak against and dissent from the dominant tradition "by the very exercise of those orifices used traditionally to typecast and dismiss her."<sup>319</sup> Ultimately, the Wife of Bath's genital poetics, her

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<sup>317</sup> Nicole Nolan Sidhu, *Indecent Exposure: Gender, Politics, and Obscene Comedy in Middle English Literature* (Philadelphia, 2016).

<sup>318</sup> Lee Patterson, "'For the Wyves Love of Bathe': Feminine Rhetoric and Poetic Resolution in the Roman De La Rose and the Canterbury Tales," *Speculum* 58.3 (1983): 656-95.

employment of the discourse of the body – reinforces the emphasis at the end of the prologue, on the effect of language, discourse, and indeed, books, on corporal beings. Ultimately, when Alyson’s body is beaten by her husband Jankyn, the violence perpetrated on the female body inherent in and perhaps constitutive of patriarchy, is made explicit.

In the Wife of Bath’s tale, Alysoun claims that her “joly body” – her experience – is enough to justify her speech. She is not, as Simon de Beauvoir claims in *The Second Sex*, inscribed within the confines of her uterus and ovaries.<sup>320</sup> Her references to the sexual and rhetorical uses to which she employs her body trouble the gender norms and prescribed feminine behaviors of patriarchal society. But the stakes are high as we look at the female body as a contested site in language, as the Wife of Bath’s narrative reveals that women’s real bodies are the sites of subordination and resistance. However, in the Wife of Bath’s tale, it is Chaucer who speaks, cross-dressing, performing her speech, her experience, inhabiting her “joly body,” including all her “membres.” We might ask if written by a man, at the remove of the host, in the voice of the Wife of Bath, there is a literal body there at all when Alysoun refers to her “queynte.” Alysoun’s body seems to be a position available for the speaker to take up and employ at will; precisely by naming her body, the speaker is able to colonize and control it. But then by emphasizing the

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<sup>319</sup> E. Jane Burns, *Bodytalk*, 63.

<sup>320</sup> Simone De Beauvoir, “Introduction to the Second Sex,” in *New French Feminisms: An Anthology* (New York, 1981).

language of bodies, a genital poetics reveals precisely the relationship between language and bodies and the concomitant vulnerability of the body in a patriarchal society.

In the preceding chapters, I investigated several cases of this genital poetics working in a range of genres in manuscripts ranging from the mid-14<sup>th</sup> century through the early 16<sup>th</sup> century. In each case, the language of the body and of the genitals – the figures of the cun, the purse, and the castle -- operates within the manuscript's matrix of meaning as positions that readers can explore and occupy. Genital poetics is a discourse through which meaning is made within the conventions of such disparate genres as fabliaux, complaint, and drama. In the first chapter of this project, I explored the significance of genital poetics in *Le chevalier qui fist les cuns parler*, in which the speaking body parts (cun and cul) are metaphorical figures operating as personae in the narrative. Thus, in one step further than Chaucer's fictional world, we have not only characters talking about their genitalia but actual genitalia speaking. In the Anglo-Norman fabliau, Daun Cun (or, Sir Cunt) has his own lines. We are clearly in the metaphorical realm of allegory here. Presumably, this speaking part is ventriloquized, as we hear from the figure, but we don't see any lips moving. We hear a male voice from a female body. The figure seems to represent a metaphorical voice rather than a literal body here, an absence rather than a presence.<sup>321</sup>

Nevertheless, genital conversation operates as a barely veiled euphemism for sexual intercourse in this fabliau. The plot turns when the countess schemes to stifle the

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<sup>321</sup> See Gayle Margherita's discussion about the presence of an absent body in Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess* in "Originary Fantasies and Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*" in Linda Lomperis and Sarah Stanbury, eds., *Feminist Approaches to the Body in Medieval Literature* (Philadelphia, 1994).

cun's voice, gagging it with cotton. I pointed out how a similar procedure was recommended in the Trotula for preventing intercourse, suggesting a rather gynecological twist in this genital poetics. When, then, at the knight's command, the cotton is drawn out of the cun with a long crok, this violation metaphorically represents a rape. This scene is a representation of the liberation of the cun's speaking voice, but the free speech of the cun is at the expense of the control of the countess over her own body. In this fabliau about the talking cunt, therefore, we see a complicated relationship between the literal and the figurative, between figures of the body and actual bodies. The language of bodies and the specifically genital poetics calls attention to the vulnerability of actual bodies.

In *Le chevalier qui fist les cuns parler*, significantly, the embodied voice arises from women -- mare, maiden and countess. But the voice is the knight's fantasy, the masculine Daun Cun's response to the knight's verbal request. The conversation is between men, with the woman's body acting as a conduit for communication.<sup>322</sup> So we are not necessarily talking about women's bodies when we are talking about a genital poetics. The figure of the vagina draws from a discourse of the body that the fabliau employs to negotiate power dynamics between men and women, and between different classes and positions in society. The cun is the image of the alternately eager or resistant, vulnerable or guarded embodied position. This genital poetics is a language resource

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<sup>322</sup> Eve K. Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York, 1985).

employed to imagine embodied perspectives and to step into positions that negotiate vulnerability and resistance.

In my second chapter, I discussed Chaucer's employment of a genital poetics in his begging poem "To His Purse." Chaucer employs genital language of the purse to contradictory and complicated effects when read in the context of the Findern manuscript. The conceit at work in this complaint poem is about a lyght purse, or an empty coin sack. But the sexual connotations are implicit. The figure of the purse represents the scrotum in other occurrences in Chaucer's canon.<sup>323</sup> But the image of suffering and heaviness connotes the gendered experiences of pregnancy and childbirth. Ultimately, I propose in this chapter that the genital poetics at work in Chaucer's "Complaint o His Purse" functions to describe the feminine position of the male author to his patron, a certain poetic as well as practical vulnerability to his sovereign patron, as well as to represent a desire for a metaphorical fullness, a type of impregnation. I don't think the poem refers to a literal sack at all, either a coin purse or a nether purse. It's not about the literal body of the speaker but his positionality, a certainly masculine impotence as well as a feminine potential for ultimate sustainability, activated by the poem's genital poetics.

My third chapter investigated the figure of the castle in the Digby Mary Magdalene play. The figure works as a reference to a literal castle, Mary Magdalene's inheritance from her father, while simultaneously functioning as an allegory for Mary Magdalene's body and even her soul. During multiple scenes in the play, the saint's

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<sup>323</sup> See for example the Wife of Bath's reference to her husband's "nether purs."

castle is vulnerable to attack, alternately falling to temptation and sexual sin or standing impenetrable against sexual and spiritual threats alike. When, however, audience members are invited into the action of the play through locus and platea staging as well as moments in the play in which the fourth wall is broken, Mary Magdalene's figurative castle is a position able to be occupied by all faithful Christians, male or female. The genital poetics we encounter in the Digby *Mary Magdalene* offers a gendered position of the saint, and of those following her exemplary model, in submitting one's self, soul and body to the power of Christ.

I explored each of these figures – the cun/cul, purse, and castle – in the context of unique manuscripts produced in Herefordshire, Derbyshire, and East Anglia, respectively. While a larger scale project might investigate how genital poetics function across a range of texts in a single genre, or geographical region, or time period, in my project, I organize each chapter around a single case study, one specific instance of genital poetics in one particular manuscript – MS Harley 2253 in the first chapter, the Findern manuscript in the second chapter, and Digby 133 in the third chapter. I approach these texts using a bibliographic, textual methodology, conscious always of the texts' manuscript context. In Arthur Bahr's *Fragments and Assemblages*, he describes a “constellation” of textual and social factors that interrelate in the politics and poetics of medieval manuscript collections. This network of meaning includes thematic connections between texts in a manuscript, organizational principles at work in the manuscript as a whole, and lateral connections to other manuscripts related philologically. Indeed, attending to the manuscript matrix within which a text appears

includes investigating the whole fabric of where these moments of genital poetics are employed, and understanding how to read those figures of the body then and now. I've found that in the context of manuscripts beginning with with an "ABC a femmes," or the complaint of Philomena, or a prayer to St. Anne, the gender dynamics of embodied poetics significantly contribute to the effects of these texts, by turns anti-feminist, or resistant, or in the interest of religious ideology that would have bodies conform to patriarchal institutions of power.

Critics of my argument have suggested that my claims depend too heavily on the idea of an organizational logic, on some type of design on the selection and collection of texts in the manuscripts I study in this project. But to be clear, when I talk about an organizational logic, I am not presupposing an "author function" doing the organizing, selection or collection of texts, although the historical circumstances of each manuscript uniquely situate its production in time and space; rather, I am making room for the subject, in Foucault's terms, a "variable and complex function of discourse," rather than its "originator."<sup>324</sup> I ask throughout, not who wrote these texts – I am not interested in revealing the desires and intentions of anonymous Herefordshire or Derbyshire "authors," nor of unveiling some hitherto unknown biographical touchstone in Chaucer's life. Instead I wrestle with Foucault's questions that "develop in the anonymity of a murmur":

What are the modes of existence of this discourse? Where has it been used, how can it circulate, and who can appropriate it for himself? What are the places in it where there is room for possible subjects? Who can assume these various subject functions? And behind all these questions,

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<sup>324</sup> Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York, 1984), 118.



we would hear hardly anything but the stirring of an indifference: What difference does it make who is speaking?<sup>325</sup>

Indeed, who can appropriate genital poetics for himself or herself or their selves? Who speaks the language of the cun? Where is the purse? Whose body is a castle? The gendered bodies implied by a genital poetics speak from a range of subject positions, drawing on the rich connotative significance of the genitals. In this project, I aimed to reveal how that appropriation of the female body by disparate parties works to essentialize women's experiences to their genitalia but also to metaphorically represent an embodied position able to be occupied by readers, male and female alike. Taking up the feminine position metaphorically means submitting your body to masculine language and discourse, and institutional hierarchies of power, or alternately resisting from a disempowered position. A genital poetics thus serves powerfully as a discourse of protest as well.

Gender and genitals and protest are imminently relevant and fertile topics in today's political economy. Recently, my alma mater Barnard College, a traditional women's college, began accepting transgender women into the college as a policy for the first time. This decision was quite controversial as stakeholders struggled with the latest questions for the feminist community: what makes a woman? What is the role of sex in gender? Many feminists today, especially those allied with the LGBTQT community, have decidedly embraced the position that genitals don't make a woman. When it comes to hearing feminist voices, the latest "wave" of feminism declares that it doesn't matter

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<sup>325</sup> Foucault, "What is an Author?," 120.

whose parts are speaking. The state of the feminist movement in 2017 is integrally related to the health of a number of other social issues that intersect in positions of privilege and oppression. Third-wave feminists are adherents of Latinx and Black feminism movements and aim to address issues of race and class as well as gender. Critics have accused feminists of losing their agenda, or of being subsumed into other causes, but many feminists have realized that while particulars make our experience unique, what unites womyn is not necessarily a vagina but a position of resistance and transgression against the patriarchal world order. Whether you subscribe to the oceanic metaphor or not, whether you think we're in the third, or fourth, or even fifth "wave," contemporary feminism is indeed alive and active.

Thus, there is an urgency to my project, a certain contemporary resonance that inspired me to look back at the evolution of a genital poetics in our literary and cultural history. I was struck this past year with the continuous use of this language of the body that I identify in the medieval period today. We saw, for example, the Access Hollywood video recording of statements made by Donald J. Trump, in which he brags that he can "grab women by the pussy" because he is famous. That particular genital term was so controversial. So many women responded by saying how disgusting it was. Too many men, unfortunately, defended the language as "locker room talk." Of course, too many women excused Trump's comments at the time while a not insignificant caucus of men allied with feminists against the presidential candidate's raunchy and violent language. In our culture, that term, the genital poetics that it employs, and the language and discourse that it rehearses, was already rife with meaning. For example, Pussy Riot is a

famous, or infamous, band in Russia that has blossomed into an activist movement and a symbol of resistance. An entire counter-cultural ideology is framed in this language of the genitals. Those claiming “pussy power” reappropriate that “nasty” word in a discourse of protest.

Trump's statement about women's bodies is about power. It's about inflicting one's desires on another. Yes, the language is gendered, but a number of different bodies can fill the positions that Trump and the objects of his attention inhabit. For example, is he "grabbing 'em by the pussy" when he makes a favorable deal, or tows a hard line with an ally or an adversary? What is the relationship between bodies when we hear that Trump “stiffs” his contractors? The language of “pussy riot,” too is a transgender movement. Men and women align under the banner of “pussy power” to resist the autocratic Russian government and its anti-gay regime. And men as well as women turned out by the thousands at the Women's March in January 2017, wearing the pink knit “pussy hats,” a symbol of resistance to Trump's inauguration and administration. As it turns out, you don't have to have a penis to be a dick, nor do you have to have a vagina to be a pussy.

This discourse of the body, this rich language of the genitalia, works to establish and trouble embodied positions in institutionalized power dynamics. Another project could have just as fruitfully pursued images of the penis as alternately powerful, potent, or sterile, impotent and effeminized images of alternative positions in the binary gender pair. This genital poetics, however, is not incumbent upon sexed bodies; instead, it represents gendered relationships and positions to power that can be occupied by male or

female; gendered positions can be performed within a range or a spectrum of formulations; and bodies can perform multiple gendered positions at once. The vagina knows a truth that other bodies that have been surveilled and controlled and violated know too: that discourses of power aim to essentialize bodies to their genitals, but that speaking back from disempowered positions was and still is the best way to resist binary structures of gender, upon which the maintenance of patriarchal institutions depend.

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